

iron buddhas

risa stephanie bear

iron buddhas is a somewhat fictionalized personal memoir.
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To the people of the Hoedads Coop, Inc.

By the same author

*100 poems
collected poems
homecomings
Starvation Ridge
Viewing Jasper Mountain*

IT'S WINTER in Georgia, nineteen-seventy-five, and Steffi, who is twenty-four and a little lonesome and sad, builds herself a kind of a Conestoga wagon deal on the back of her pickup truck.

She bends conduit on a jig made of stakes in the ground in a semicircle and bolts three sheets of plywood on, overlapping. Paints the plywood. Now she's got a round white camper shell, with "Oregon or Bust" in black lettering over the door.

The truck's a canary yellow '70 Chevy and she paints "Rocinante" across the front of the hood, also in black lettering. From the rear-view mirror she hangs an *ojo de dios* made of two twigs and some rainbow-dyed yarn.

She builds a low bed frame inside the truck bed, wall to wall, with nine inches of storage space underneath. There she tucks books, canned goods, bags of beans and rice, water, canteens, backpack, extra pants and shirts and sock hats and gloves and rain gear and boots, all of one dress, an axe, a shovel, a propane stove, a cranky yellow chain saw, a child-size twenty-two single-shot rifle that she got when she was all of nine, fishing gear, compass, space blanket, firestarters, shoe grease, knife sharpener, first aid stuff. Lipstick? Ha!

On top of the platform she lays out a foam rubber pad, a Hudson Bay blanket, a sleeping bag, a little pillow she's had for years with "Princess" stitched on it in needlepoint by her grandma, a four-string Appalachian dulcimer, and an

eighteen-chord Autoharp with finger picks. A small broom with its handle sawed off short will do for the housework. Bolted to the wall she has a homemade lamp bracket holding a family heirloom kerosene lamp.

In the cab, she's got food and water, maps, an eight-track player, a flashlight and a revolver. Also some cash. Not a lot. No credit cards.

The truck's insured. She's not. She's also unemployed. Does she care? She tosses her hair, puts her hands on her hips and looks west.

⋮

She's halfway across the pines of Alabama when a full size U-Haul truck passes her doing what seems like about eighty miles an hour.

State trooper's right behind it.

Trooper, blue lights bawling, peels out to get around in front of the truck, and the trucker whips left, kicks the patrol car into the median. Car fishtails all over the Deep South for a moment or two, then settles in for the chase, whooping. Out of sight they run. Then, one-two-three troopers and one-two county mounties, zoop-zoop-zoop, zoop-zoop and over the horizon. Get 'em, fellas! But what Steffi had seen as the truck went by was a guy grinning at her and her little prairie schooner.

Having a good time.

Bless you, brother. Bless you, sister.



Rocinante takes the wide wastes of Texas in stride with three pilgrims in her cab. Steffi's passengers, who are buying the gas, are a young-old lady with new-age self-assurance, freckles and huge hoop earrings, with a brand-new husband, a handsome Guatemalan she has met on a commune south of the border. They're hitching to Seattle so that Miguel, who knows almost no English and has never traveled, can meet his in-laws.

Hoop-ears teaches language and culture in the cab day and night, as freeway America rolls by underneath the wheels, concrete ribbon, gas station, concrete ribbon.

Steffi enjoys the lectures at first, and so does Miguel, but by Arizona, they're both schooled out, and each begins to examine with morose attention the road-killed recaps and armadillos passing by.

"Now, Miguel. This is a backpack, b-a-c-k-p-a-c-k, also called a ruck sack, it's not what backpackers call a backpack, 'cuz it hasn't got a frame. This is a zipper, z-i-p-p-e-r, like you have there on your jeans, and in here is a pocket, like a jeans pocket."

Miguel asks her something in Spanish, she rattles off something back at him, they go on a while like that, but faster. Then Miguel summons immense dignity, jams his hands in his -- jeans pockets, whatever -- and enunciates, slowly and emphatically: "*You know ... always ... everything.*" A tear forms in the corner of his eye, and he turns away to regard the sunset on the passing, wasted hills. Stranger in a strange land.

Rocinante pulls up onto a bit of unfenced desert. The pilgrims gather dry mesquite branches and sit around a fire, close, under a wheel of stars turning earth-slow, brilliant as only desert stars can be when the night plans to drop to zero.

Steffi has never known zero but as it doesn't seem to worry her passengers, she's game. She brings her sleeping bag to the fire.

...

Steffi tells about Georgia nights. Hoop-ears translates for Miguel from time to time.

"My great-great grandfather, the Welsh one who married a Creek lady, raised cotton on top of Dugdown Mountain. Everything he did is gone now -- it's all red oaks, a hundred years' worth. The road along the ridge was through country without a single house, so it could get dark, I mean *really* dark. My mama told me this story as I'm telling it now.

"Grandpa was coming home on the buggy, coming along with a lantern, he was just in this pool of yellow light, oh about twenty foot across. And the horse, which was a good horse, not one you would think of to get scared a lot, just pulled up short and wouldn't gee, get, nor haw. So Grandpa, who was real tired and not thinking to stay out all night, gets down to go around front and talk sense into the horse, when right then the horse up and hauls off the buggy toward home and Grandpa is in the road in pitch black.

"Well, he can see just one thing and that's the light in the window of his house, across the cotton fields way around the ridge. It's two miles by the road and about a mile, mile an' a half down and up through the fields. He's standing there

thinking what in the hell has got into that horse and then he thinks maybe he hears something. Or, no, he thinks maybe he feels something, like there's eyes looking through his back. He turns, and he doesn't see nothin' -- but he feels like the front of his face sees something, you know what I mean? Like there's a kind of living headlights out there, and he's caught in the beam, and he is *food*.

"So Grandpa, he starts running down the road, and he sorta hears something soft and heavy trotting in the dust of the wagon ruts behind him. So he throws off his hat to give that thing something to sniff at and jumps down into the cotton field and cuts across the rows toward that light in his kitchen window. Well, something thumps and swishes into the cotton behind him, and so he throws off his shirt and runs on down by the pond. He's running about as hard as he can go, goes by the pond, and through the willows, and right behind him something's rustling willow twigs. So he quick somehow shucks his pants and runs in nothing but his shoes up through the cotton on the other side of the draw to where he's about at the end of the farm yard.

"He can see Grandma is working at the table by the window, rolling dough with her big arms, and hollers: "*Ma, open that door!*" She runs over and pops the door with her floured hand and he comes through on the jump, slams it behind him and whap! something hits that door so hard it bends the hinges.

"Next day they see where there was deep scratches all over that door, had to plane it down like it was new-sawn. The tracks they found in the farm yard was cougar tracks. He said he could put both his fists side by side like this" -- Steffi

demonstrates -- "and stick them down in a track with room to spare."

Miguel likes the story. Hoop-ears does too. Looks like they have made up. She snuggles down deep in her sleeping bag, tucked under his arm, and Miguel gets out a long wooden flute.

He plays, something startlingly complex, something Central American and lovely, entirely suited to night in a wild place. If there were any breeze he couldn't do it; the night is the coldest each of them has known. But the air is still as a black sea of glass, and his notes rise like owls to the mountainside close by.

...

Rocinante carries Steffi and her passengers into Los Angeles, and Steffi's not happy with the place. She's staying at some ashram full of people in turbans, which is cool, but the streets outside are unremittingly mean, full of men in long black coats and black glasses that walk into places and everybody gets quiet. Y'know?

So she goes out to the curb to see if Rocinante is still there or has she got her tires slashed or anything, and there's goo all over the windshields. "What *is* this stuff?" she asks, sliming her thumb.

"That's smog," says one of the turbans.

I'm gone from here, thinks Steffi, and says goodbye to her cross-country passengers. She goes about ten blocks toward Oregon, but something keeps catching her attention.

There are all these little shops, with signs on them like "House of Oral Love," in neon. Each has a storefront window

with one or two bored-looking women in it. One of them waves her over.

Business must be painfully slow. She pulls over to the curb. Two of the ladies lean out of a doorway, framed in high-gloss enamel. They don't look particularly prostitutish to her, but then she's never met one.

Sheltered life, Ms. Deep South, *really* sheltered.

One lady has a kind of Sixties page-boy hairdo, a string of fake pearls and those pointy-framed black glasses that women wear in sitcoms when you're not supposed to think they're pretty. But she is. The other has long, long hair and a fresh face, someone who gets enough sleep. Steffi can see the book she's been reading, upended on the broken-backed chair behind her. It's a college sociology textbook.

So, is she doing her research here? Or, yeah, just earning tuition? Work-study, ha-ha-hah. If she were less shy, Steffi'd like to sit and talk with them awhile, learn something about them, and about stereotyping, which she realizes she's been doing.

These are people. Just like, y'know anybody.

"Y'want work? You're not bad lookin'."

Me? "Wow, thanks, but I'm off to Oregon."

"Oh, gee, lucky you. I'd love to go there. Good luck, honey."

...

In an hour Steffi rounds a bend, pulls off the pavement through a gap between two guardrails, bumps along to a stop on a high cliff, and steps out of the truck's cab to hear the waves collapsing among the rocks of the California coast. She's experiencing her first sunset on the Pacific Ocean; the

smell of the strange nameless wind-sculpted vegetation all around brings her for the first time some awareness of just how far she is from Warren County, Georgia, or pretty much anywhere she's ever been. On the beach below, small energetic birds are running, running, matched by their reflections on the wet beach, running down to the restless water, running back with it as boils up the darkening strand.

She's only seen them in books.

ROCINANTE NOSES up the coast, stopping for a wine-tasting here and a view there, and hits the rains of Oregon in the middle of a socked-in, moonless night. Steffi nearly plows into a cliff on a mountain curve, which wakes her enough to find the turn-off, a right into a valley that has in it the smallest post office in Oregon (not much bigger than an outhouse), and about sixty houses, all scattered along about fourteen miles of noisy creek.

The road turns to gravel. The cut-banks, full of bedraggled last year's foxgloves, lean in to kiss the cab windows, and the dark turns almighty. Steffi realizes she's passed the last house and must have missed the commune she's heading for, so she begins a kay-turn on the road, jockeys back and forth about four times, and -- fa-doomp! -- sinks her rear wheels in the ditch.

Ah, well. Whaddya expect?

Can't just go to bed and deal with it in the ay em, we're athwart the road and a sign back there did say "Caution: Log Trucks" -- so this trip has gotta reorganize before dawn. Steffi digs out a flashlight and rain jacket, hikes back to where she saw the last window with light in it.

She gets her first whiff of wet Douglas fir, along with other smells she can't identify yet: western hemlock, western red cedar, red alder, bigleaf maple, sword fern, bracken, thimbleberry, and salal. She looks up into the canopy closing in far overhead of trees over a hundred and fifty feet tall, and

on impulse switches off the light to let the rain fall on her face in silence, in darkness.

Delicious. Especially after Texas and its pavement of fried armadillo.

The house she comes to is covered, roof and walls, with cedar shakes and sticks itself out at the woods at odd angles all over, as if it had been built by someone looking over their shoulder. Raw alder smoke, full of half-digested creosote, pours out the chimney and drifts down to the creek across the road. Steffi coughs, then knocks. She hears activity.

"Whoa, hang on, somebody's out there."

"Yeah, I bet they're in a ditch halfway to Six Rivers."

The door opens, and Steffi looks up into the face of a really tall man, six-four or better, with long hair and a full beard and deep-set preacher's eyes.

"Hi, I'm Steffi Smith, I'm looking for the commune."

"Which one? This here's a commune, ma'am."

"Uh, Omega Farm, friend of mine lives there, guy named Dan."

"Oh, yeah, that's four miles down, you missed it. Four miles on the left."

Big Guy waits, hoping to close the door.

"Um, left my truck up the Forest Service road, it's uh, stuck, I'd leave it but...."

"Told ya!" someone calls out.

Guy chuckles. "Yeah, we'll help you out, actually we do that a lot, come on in."

Steffi enters the light from a kerosene lamp, which seems to her very bright after the mountain blackness. She knows lamps, and appreciates at once the skills of her hosts: no

coloring dyes in the fuel, a clean chimney, trimmed wick. Real light, steady, easy on the eyes.

At once she takes in the interior scheme that she will see in all the homes of her friends for the next ten years: cedar paneling, a leaky skylight, spider plant in a macrame planter basket strategically hung to catch the drips from the skylight, shelves loaded with little brass incense burners and copies of Ram Dass's *Be Here Now*. An embossed iron stove sits on a brick pad in the midst, surrounded by six people and a yellow lab dog.

Three small women, with the long straight hair, no makeup, long floral-print dresses, small noses and freckles of hippiedom, such as Steffi had known in Georgia in the Sixties, and three large men, patriarchs in beards and suspenders, with ruddy cheeks and rough hands, look back at her from deep within smoky-looking overstuffed chairs. Nice folks all, really -- but Steffi feels she has interrupted something serious.

The man who has answered the door takes it on: "We, ah, we're White Star, oldest commune in the valley, but, uh, we're breaking up. Yeah. Hmm, couldn't agree on how to divvy up, so, uh, we're going to have a coin toss."

One of the young ladies looks up soulfully, tossing her blonde mane, and shows Steffi a Walking Liberty silver dollar. "Me and Jeffrey -- " she nods at the giant who spoke before her -- "have called heads, and the others here have called tails, and title to the whole place will go to the winners."

"We'll do that after I help Miss Steffi here," says Jeffrey. "Lemme get my rain gear."

Jeffrey clumps out to the mudroom. Steffi stands steaming before the solemn contestants, wondering what one says on such an occasion.

The coin lady tosses her mane again, and wrinkles her freckles at the visitor. "Where 'bout did you come in from?"

"Georgia." Steffi steps gingerly across to the stove, leaving little puddles as she goes, and spreads her hands to its warmth.

"Oh, you're a friend of Dan's. Yeah. He's really nice, hard worker and smarts too ... how come you gave up on Georgia?"

A lot just got said right here. Coin-lady's eyes add, *He's taken, you know.*

And Steffi's eyes say, *S'okay, we're just friends.*

"Uh, well, I felt like I kinda wore out my welcome, thought I'd see what it's like out here."

"I know what you mean, *nobody* is from here. I'm from New Jersey myself."

She seems to need to explain further. "Too many cemeteries."

Yeah, that makes sense to Steffi. All over Atlanta, all over the great snorting East, cemeteries, including the one she'd seen so many times, with its big stone lion sleeping over the mass grave of Confederate dead. Huge smokestacks of Cabbage Town's cotton mill for a backdrop. Generations sitting on top of each other, each doing things their forebears have already done, breathing used air, already know everybody they want to know, burying one another in long rows, right up to the stone walls along the sidewalks. Dilapidated gas station across the street, hollow-eyed old man leaning on the pump in the shade of a tin roof, sucking

at a half-cold Nehi, too hot, too tired to curse a fate they 're only dimly aware of, *outta there Steffi*, Rocinante can go a pretty good ways in a straight line on a fill-up, look for a place to breathe. No wonder you turned up your face to the rain among those ancient fir trees. Even this room, with its friendly woodstove, seems too civilized for you right now.

Jeffrey comes through, a heavy-duty tow chain draped over both shoulders. "Okay, let's go," he says.

...

Omega Farm turns out to be a collection of some twenty-odd hippies of the anarcho-Catholic-Worker type that dates back to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The men all look like Gurdjieff and the younger women look like Joni Mitchell. Steffi likes the setting: big white-and-brown farmhouse, a retired dairy farm amidst densely forested hills, smell of damp alder-wood smoke drifting through the omnipresent Douglas firs.

The meals are good, too: vegetarian fare, homemade bread, homemade tofu, fresh eggs, real cream. She half entertains the idea of joining this commune, but there's a commotion in the entryway. A new member has taken a notion to sweep the area, out of the goodness of her long-haired, willowy heart, and she's immediately surrounded by three or four of the regulars.

"No, no, you mustn't sweep the mudroom!"

"Why not? I feel like it..." Lower lip trembles.

"You're not the one scheduled to do it," says the first one.

"We each have our responsibilities, we had meetings, we gotta do it like we said in the meetings," adds the second one.

"There's a list. If it says on the list, sweep the mudroom, and your name is on it, you sweep the mudroom." This third one is tall and warrior-like, and says it with arms crossed.

The joy goes out of Spontaneous Sweeper's face right there, and she slumps and surrenders the broom.

Before the broom hits the wall in its corner, Steffi is already planning her getaway.

She catches up to her old Georgia friend, Dan, out pulling up yellow flowers in the pasture.

"Uh, Dan."

"Hey-ho, Steph'nie."

Dan, lanky, sandy-bearded, always wearing a cowboy Stetson and always smiling, is quite a few years younger than Steffi but has already seen much more of the world, and, having seen it, has settled in as the farm's gardener, the way medieval types used to join the monastery.

"Dan, I got to pull up stakes here and go to work somewhere."

"Tree planting."

"Um?"

"Yep. Pull up some of these with me. Bend your knees, lock your arms, then straighten your legs. They'll come right out."

The flowers are pretty, but Steffi notices she doesn't like the smell of her hands after pulling one. "What are they?"

"Tansy ragwort. Makes the cow's milk bad, and if she eats enough of it, she dies."

Steffi starts pulling. "Tree planting?"

"Yeah. I did that when I was first out here."

Dan begins weaving tales: how, when he first reached Oregon, needing work, he discovered a cooperative, the Hoedags, full of earnest hippies, that made bids on government reforestation contracts and moved, en masse, to the work sites to live in tents, buses, yurts, and pickup campers, sitting around campfires at night singing, then working like demons the next day. How the work is done, the terminology, the small-scale economics, a cross between migrant work and tribalism. How his crew took over an abandoned one-room schoolhouse and lived in it all winter, chopping wood, carrying water.

Steffi loves hearing that about the wood and water.

Yes, it brings up her favorite Zen story. The nun. She had worked so hard, carrying the water even by moonlight. The steps were uneven and mossy, but she was determined not to spill even a drop; this was her sign of mindfulness. And the bucket had simply, from old age, sprung apart and dumped the water. Big *kensho*! So she wrote a poem:

I tried, really I did.

I held up the hoop, then the strakes.

Busted! Wet feet.

No more moon water.

No more water pail!

Something like that.

"Best thing," continues Dan, "the crews take women. Nobody else hires women for tree planting."

"So, uh, Dan, how do the camp chores get divvied up?"

"Pile up the tansies; if you leave 'em all over the ground like that, they get any wet weather, they'll re-root. Oh, pretty much like in any family, y'know, them that are into it do it, and if they get tired of it, they stop, then if everybody else gets cold they'll get the hint and go pick up an ax, whatever."

"Well, yeah, but ... "

He knows what she's getting at. "The men do their share. And they're respectful."

"Sounds good. Where do I go to join?"

"Um, well, Lemmee see." Dan straightens up, grunts, puts his hands on his lower back, and swivels. "There are different crews in the co-op, about ten of 'em, and what you do is join a crew. I was in the Star Crew; most of the people from around here that are in this thing are on the Face Crew. I'll see if I can find out if there's a crew meeting any time soon."

""Face?""

"I dunno, that's what they called it. How about you pick up that pile over there, I'll pick up this one, and we'll dump it over the pasture fence."

...

Steffi gets to the meeting of Face crew at Slough Creek late on a Monday night. It doesn't look like a meeting, it looks like a party. People are handing around plates of big brownies, and one guy in John Lennon glasses with bushy gray hair and beard and a black felt crusher hat is belting out melodies on a gleaming soprano saxophone. His backup is a short, immensely muscular black man in a multicolored shirt and dreadlocks, working the head of a handmade conga drum. Steffi doesn't even know what that is, but it sounds good to her after a long diet of pages from a Baptist hymnal.

A bronzed greek-goddess type offers Steffi a brownie.

"Have a little milk to wash it down. But not too much." She smiles conspiratorially.

Steffi dutifully goes easy on the milk. She likes food, though, and especially likes chocolate, so she's back to the brownie plate at regular intervals, between snatches of conversation in which she apparently joins the crew and is introduced to various craggy, bearded men and broad-shouldered, weather-blonded women.

Suddenly she's thirsty, and heads for the kitchen looking for a tumbler and tap water. The sink unexpectedly balloons up before her eyes, and she realizes she doesn't remember how to get water from a tap. Very alien thing, this silvery, snaking device extending from the kitchen counter.

Steffi navigates slowly through a tilting living room, filled with undulating people who all sound as though they are talking under water in a faraway place, and falls, in slow motion, like a leaf or a bit of goose down, into an overstuffed chair that seems to be vibrating and shimmying though the colors of the rainbow. She eyes her hands. She can feel that they're holding still, yet they look as if they're rotating at the wrists.

"Cheeses," says someone nearby. "The new girl ate *six* brownies."

"Didn't she know what was in them?"

No, what?

A bushy black beard, flecked with silver and gold lights, looms nearby. "You better stay put for awhile there, gal."

"Help," says Steffi, weakly.

"No, just stay there. Breathe deep and real slow." A blanket, woven of a thousand glittering stars, appears across her lap.

Steffi feels her eyes widening and growing around to the sides of her head. She can see for *miles*, everything in focus: each tree, every leaf of salal and salmonberry, every fiddlehead glistening with the recent rains, every mouse scurrying along windthrown hemlock logs.

Uttering a croak of delight, she spreads her black wings and swoops from her favored perch, a dead branch near the top of a lightning-shattered old Douglas fir, seeking beetles, flying ants, or maybe an unsuspecting earwig. Beneath her, the shadows of small gray clouds, fresh from the Pacific, skitter across a patchwork landscape of old growth, clear-cuts, yarder landings, gravel quarries, and beaver ponds. Slowly the light around her fades, as though she has flown gently into one of the small clouds.

...

Next thing she knows, she's sitting in a cafe in a town she's never seen before. An empty cup is sitting before her on the counter, and her friend Dan is pouring, apparently, a second cup of coffee for her.

"Uh, where am I?"

"This is the Alderton Cafe, Omega Farm owns it. Today's my duty day. You were saying?" Dan's wearing some kind of long white apron with little stains of avocado on it. His farmer's fingernails are clean.

"I guess I forget."

"Something about *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and how you understand it now." Dan looks her in the eye appraisingly. "It seemed *really* important to you."

"What day is it?"

"Thursday."

A guy, all bushy-beardy, comes in the front door. Steffi thinks she hasn't seen him before. Comes right over to the counter. Puts his finger almost in Steffi's face.

"*Her!* That's the one! Barfed all over my front steps and just drove off without cleaning up after herself!"

Dan interposes himself between them.

"What did you expect? I heard there was *acid* in those brownies, not just hash, and you expect a new girl, looking for work, is gonna know that? Did anybody bother to tell her? You start in on her and I will personally put you out on the sidewalk."

Dan's not a big fella, but suddenly he looks like a pro wrestler. "Well," says the dude, "whatever, I mean ya can't always look out for everybody, they gotta have some smarts on their own."

Dan glowers some more. "And ya know, that wasn't completely safe." Tips his head forward and looks at Bushy from under his eyebrows.

Steffi wants to say, "Well, hey, nobody would ..." but she doesn't say it because she doesn't *know*. She's led an unusual life but she's always patrolled her borders. Until the brownies.

The dude's sorry. He knows the crew is honorable in that way, but he gets it that Steffi might not yet know that. Not that she's given it a thought until this moment! He sees that too, but he's still contrite and apologizes like a gentleman. Twice.

"One thing at a time. So, has she joined your crew?" Dan picks up a glass and starts cleaning it with a dishrag, as a sign that The Crisis Is Over.

"I think so, yeah. And we need bodies, even a greenhorn." The big bear rubs his chin through the deep beard, turns to Steffi. "You got gear?"

"I've got my truck, clothes, food."

"Hard hat? Rain gear? Caulk boots?"

"What are 'cork' boots?"

Dan leans across the counter, smiling. "We have some at the farm that will fit her." He doesn't mention they are *his* boots -- but he knows her feet are as big as his.

The tall guy looks back and forth between them, settles his light blue eyes on Steffi. "Ok, meet the crummy at the Greenwood Creek bridge at four-thirty tomorrow morning. Bring your own lunch and water. We'll give yuh a dag and bag till the end of the contract. What do we call yuh?"

"Steffi."

"Right, I'm Burt." Shakes hands with a rough, supercalloused palm.

Four-thirty?

And what's a "crummy?"

"HI, I'M Chuck, this is Willard, Amy, Juneen, Bill, Murray, Jerry-Up, Jerry-Down, Burt, and Marie. We're gonna pick up the Magruders and go on up the hill."

"Uh, hi, I'm Steffi Smith."

"Pleased to meet ya. Kinda crawl on to the back there, put yer stuff under the seat, and take a nap if ya want, it's a dark commute."

Steffi has never seen a set-up like this before. As it pulled up, one headlight bright, the other dim, it looked, in the dark, like some kind of over-extended station wagon, but it seats twelve, plus the driver. Five forwards, two reverse. An unholy aroma of abused bodies, mud, long-dead food, and of the ashes of some kind of burning weed. She settles in next to a large form hunkered in the darkness.

"Hey, I'm Burt. Ya remember, ya puked on my porch."

"Sorry about that."

"Well, things happen. Sleep tight."

"Uh, yeah."

Burt shifts around a bit, winds up with his massive head on Steffi's shoulder.

Steffi shifts away a bit, till Burt's chin finds a less obtrusive purchase, and watches the darkness ahead of the headlights. Occasionally the crummy passes one or two deer, their eyes shining briefly into the mystery of human passage. A lighter flares, and something glowing is handed from seat to seat.

Steffi waves it off when a hand appears. Whatever, she's not gonna smoke a brownie. With other folks' spit on it, no less.

Lots of country miles, like driving through a snake's guts, later, Chuck pulls the crummy off onto a wideout, just as some daylight has begun to seep over the horizon. Two bushy-beards with Lennon glasses throw their caulks, lunch sacks and hardhats in and climb into the last front seats. They're twins. Must be the Magruders. The gears rattle and grind a bit, then the rig turns onto a gravel road and starts climbing, in second gear, then low, then low-low. Steffi's ears are popping. Then the noise stops.

"Piss stop!" yells the driver.

Moaning, the crew crawl over one another and line up alongside the road, the men standing in front of the crummy, the women squatting behind it. No one looks at anyone else. There's something in front of them worth seeing, anyway.

At her feet Steffi sees the world drop away, a sea of stumps almost at right angles downwards, receding into a cloud bank that stretches to the horizon. The sun is rising over the clouds, setting all their faces on fire, bright orange with morning's promise. The air is already so clear, above the cloud banks, that Steffi can see individual fir trees on islands of mountaintop three ridges away. The horizon actually seems curved, like an ocean's rim. Steffi has seen a lot of beauty already, done some hiking, been above clouds before, been out of sight of land, has watched the Mississippi and the Rockies and stuff roll by Rocinante's windows, but somehow none of it has prepared her for this.

Like, the sun comes up and that's your basic C major chord like in the movies, but then, on the clouds, there are all these pastels, modulating into one mysterious minor key after

another. There's a worshipping silence, and then somebody whispers, "Holy Shit."

As though they'd seen this maybe a hundred times, yet it gets to be new all over again every time, because it's that good.

When the crummy starts up again, things begin to happen all through its innards. Feet squeeze into tall caulk boots, coffee is poured, low conversations, coughs, noses blowing. The Magruders are eating identical oatmeal from identical wooden bowls. Hard hats are fished out from under seats. A wisp of smoke drifts back from the front, and another small soggy hand-rolled cigarette travels from hand to hand. By the time it gets to Burt, it's small and even soggy. He produces a tiny surgical clamp, clips it onto the brown paper along what's left of one side, inhales from the smaller, non-smoldering end, and offers it to Steffi, saying, in a curiously high-pitched voice, "want a hit?"

Steffi's thinking of the fits of coughing somewhere up front. "Uh, no, but thanks."

"Suit yourself. Helps keep the rain outta your bones." He sips at the remainder of the glowing coal, lips pursed.

They're arriving at a Scene of Destruction: upended stumps, raw boulders, rusted jerry cans, a cleared flat gravel space big enough to turn around a tractor-trailer truck, oil-slicked puddles, sawdust, deep tire tracks. A green pickup is standing tilted in the giant tire tracks, with a pile of brown paper sacks the size of trash bags in the truck bed. Two men in rain gear walk over to the crummy.

"Hey, Chuck."

"Hey."

"Got a full crew?"

"Yeah, twelve an' a newbie."

"K, well this one's all slash down the right hand side, 'bout five acres, then a rockpile, good ground below the rockpile, steep but good coming up the left side, twelve acres overall."

"Well, we could do it in a day if you'll let us wide it out a bit."

"Well, I might woulda, it's northeast aspect and we think it'll survive good, but the C.O. says stick to the contract, so we gotta hold you to the nine-by."

Steffi suddenly realizes she's listening to Greek or Chinese or something. Arrh, every new trade, a new language.

"Hey, Stef!" Chuck's waving, in one hand, a large rubberized canvas bag sewn to a heavy web belt, and in the other a wicked-looking tool the size of a pickax.

"This here's a dag and bag. Mostly we own our own here, this'n's a spare. Yuh want to stick about eight bundles of trees in here -- " He demonstrates with twist-tied handfuls of green-topped, brown-rooted seedlings -- "these are fifties, so that's four hundred, and keep track of yer totals. This job's 'by-the-tree.'" Now grab yer dag, follow me."

The tool has an ash handle a bit over three feet long, curved like an adze handle. Steffi sees that it has a long flat blade at the end, at right angles, for punching into the ground at the end of a swing. The other crew members have curved blades, and theirs look sharper, too. This spare must be an older model, the one no one else wants.

Par for the course.

The trees are heavy around her waist. The unpadded belt is cutting off circulation, bruising something. With the unfamiliar mix of caulk boots, rain gear, hard hat, gloves and tree bag, Steffi feels like a deep-sea diver. She's sweating

already, and she's not even off the landing. Everyone else has already gone.

Chuck disappears into thorn-covered brush ahead of her. There are seedlings everywhere, protruding from freshly upturned earth, and from the fog below, Steffi can hear matter-of-fact conversations mixed with the thunk of the crew's hoedads into the ground.

Chuck leads the way, half crawling in mud and rotting vegetation, till they come out into open ground downslope from the brush.

"We are on what's called a clear-cut. Fir trees don't like t' grow in th' shade, so the loggers take 'em all an' leave this field of stumps. We put in th' next crop of trees an' they all grow up together in th' light."

He waves his arm across the vista expansively. "It's all black 'cuz they have burnt up th' branches 'n such -- slash -- helps us get at it t'plant, 'fertilizes it some. S'just slash-'n-burn agriculture, s'all."

Chuck points to the nearest people, who are thunking holes in the earth among the stumps, and whipping little dabs of green from their bags to the holes. They're spread across the hillside on a diagonal. "This here's the 'line,' see? Trees *above* yuh, *no* trees below yuh. On the other side of th' creek, it'll be just th' opposite. So yuh go nine feet -- that's three hoe handles till yuh get yer eye -- put a tree in, then nine feet to th' next one, like a checkerboard. 'Course, stumps and stuff will mess up yer grid, so yuh gotta adjust to it."

"Th' 'suspectors' -- " he nods toward the green hats, who are standing on stumps, leaning on shovels, chatting -- "are *not* yer friends, and they are going to be inspecting tight here. Ninety per cent quality pays a hundred on contract

price, eighty pays ninety, seventy pays eighty, sixty-nine pays *not a gahdam thing*."

He looks over at them again, to make sure his voice hasn't carried.

"They're under pressure from above to pay ninety or less, so we gotta keep our numbers up. That means planting tight-by, go eight feet instead of ten, when the logs and stuff'll let yuh."

One of the inspectors ambles over to watch the lesson.

Chuck chops at the mountainside upslope from his boots, with a two-handed grip on his dag.. But the point of the blade doesn't enter the ground. He's turned the blade sideways, and is chopping out a foot-square section of turf. Then he throws his right arm behind him, letting the tool handle slide in his hand till it reaches the end, and brings the dag over his head in a wide arc, burying the point of the blade all the way to the handle's bracket in the soft earth.

"Y'open the hole with the hoedad at the bottom by pulling up on the handle, see? Then the top by pulling down. Now yuh've got a hole twelve inches deep and four across all the way down. Right? Now take yer tree and dangle the roots down; give 'em a shake so they'll hang loose and won't get caught upside down, see? 'Cuz roots upside down don't work -- they'll die on yuh; if all the roots are upside down the whole tree'll die. They only work one way. When it's sunny, keep it in yer shade, too, and don't hold it out in the wind too long. All that sun and air'll kill yer tree. Now yuh pack the dirt around the tree with yer hoedad blade, once, twice, like this, so there's no air pocket -- that air will kill yer tree in the ground just like it will in yer hand. Now press down with yer foot, but not too close to the stem and not too hard.

There's hair roots, yuh can't see 'em, on every root that yuh *can* see, and if yuh get rough you'll strip those off at the base, and they'll die, and there goes yer tree, 'k.? They are *babies*. You are their *mummy*. Yah? Now on to the next spot."

...

Steffi spends the next half hour fumbling around with the awkwardly heavy tool, the dirt and the pencil-sized seedlings, trying not to fall off the mountain. Chuck sticks with her, correcting her moves, commenting. The inspector watches, amused. A bald eagle flies overhead, resplendent even in the rain, but no one's watching. The hillside rings with tools hitting stones and pebbles, with hard hats smacking into slashed limbs and boulders. Spiked boots chuff into slick logs and clatter on rocks. Across the hillside, in the mild, soporific rain, she hears a constant refrain of heavy breathing and muttered curses.

It's hard, it's uncomfortable, it's cold, it's wet, it *hurts* to be here. But Steffi's feeling a rising excitement, like she's singing inside. This activity seems to have limitless potential of some kind, for measuring one's self against one's self, like track and field. She hefts the hoe over her shoulder and punches it deep into the earth.

"*That's* the spirit," says Chuck. "Y'gotta be hard out here, tough like iron, but aware of absolutely everythin' -- yer next spot, th' next person, th' suspector, th' tree total, th' specs, th' strategy, loose rocks n' logs. *everythin'*. Be hard but do nice."

"Like an iron Buddha."

"Uhh, yeah, like that. "

STEFFI'S LIFE has become a bruised but happy blur.

Mornings, she wakes easily; she's always been her own alarm clock. She picks a time and -- *bim!* -- her eyes pop open. The crew discovers this and they award her the role of bell ringer.

In the darkness her arm snakes forth from her sleeping bag and she feels assorted pants and shirts in a pile on Rocinante's truckbed floor for dampness. The least damp or mud-stiffened pants and shirt are nominated as today's dress code.

Staggering outside in unlaced tennis shoes, she picks up by feel a cold, rained-slick hammer from a stump and with her other hand she bats around at the air till she finds a seventeen-inch long forged-steel hoedad blade hanging from a tree on a strand of baling twine. This she pounds on for thirty seconds until lamps and flashlights pop on all over the still-benighted camp.

"Okay, *okay*, Stef! Cheeses frackin' cries arready!"

Someone stumbles over bodies in the entryway of the crew yurt, dodges pairs of sweating caulk boots hanging from the low rafters, lights the white-gas lantern and begins the invariable breakfast of eggs with broccoli.

Steffi likes ketchup on hers.

The sky rolls slowly over into an alloy of lead and silver as boots, dags, bags, rain gear, and lunches are stuffed into the crummy, followed by eleven groaning bodies.

The engine, feeling all of its two-hundred-twenty-seven thousand miles plus a night of near-freezing rain, mumbles and hiccups as water in the gas line is cleared away by sheer starter-motor power and ultimately catches. The headlights take a stab at the darkness; firs, cedars, alders, hemlocks, stumps and Forest Service road signs appear and disappear at regular intervals, punctuated by the occasional spooked deer or even bear, and after many turns on hairpin curves over black gulfs of wet wilderness, the crummy sighs onto the landing as the day turns to as much day as it's going to.

The wind shoves dead grasses around on the landing in the rain, but the clouds, rippling through like a fast freight, never part.

Shrug into wet rain gear, lace up caulk boots, slap on hard hat, bag up, discuss the unit strategy, step over the edge. Muscles still sore from yesterday complain at first, then oil themselves with their own internal residues and fall into the routine.

Lunch, standing up, shivering. It's whatever you bring. Steffi's is baked potatoes sliced in half, with strips of bacon as the filling. She needs all the calories she can get to just to be here.

She's also acquired a tiny pipe, a cheap Dr. Grabow of gnarled briar with a nickel band round the stem, which she fills with Flying Dutchman in the mornings, and smokes, bowl upside-down in the rain, crouched in the lee of the crummy, till lunch is over. It makes her spit a lot, but it helps. Seems to keep guys from hitting on her, too.

The days are long, almost dark-to-dark. She's carrying three or four hundred trees in the morning and the same in the afternoon. Her hips are permanently bruised. But a tree is

a dime. She's making seventy to eighty dollars a day in the middle of a high-unemployment recession and she's proud of herself.

Crummy up, drive home. Headlights, deer eyes and glowing joints.

...

A sunny day after what seems like months of rain. The crew puts in an eleven-hour day to finish the contract on time. As the crummy reaches camp, it's still light. The rain has already soaked into the porous earth and the grass looks inviting.

Chuck parks the crummy, and for a moment no one moves. All eyes are on the transformed campsite. The setting sun, dropping down into a notch in the westward-trending canyon, illuminates the beaten trucks, cars, and buses, the sagging, bewildered tents, and the yurt with its rusting cap and chimney. Dogs run to the crummy, wagging almost cheerily.

Chuck opens the door and and simply slumps to the earth. Bill and Mike crawl out and lie down on top of Chuck. Willard, Burt, and Jerry-Down pile out of the passenger side, take three steps, kneel and collapse on top of Bill and Mike. Amy, Juneen, Murray, Steffi, and Jerry-Up simply add themselves to the pile-on. The heap of treeplanters lies there, like a colony of seals -- with the dogs' inquiring tongues on their faces -- for a good twenty minutes.

The Magruders, who have stayed home today, noticing that no one has come to dinner yet, leave the comfort of the yurt fire and amble out to inspect the dazed herd. They pull their red wool crushers low over their eyes and hook their thumbs in their suspenders.

"Uhhh, y'all want any macaroni and hamburger?" asks one. "Or doncha?" asks the other.

"Got coffee, too," they add. They turn around, as one, and stroll back to the yurt. The pile untangles, limb by groaning limb.

...

That night, the rains return with force. Rocinante's roof sounds like she's been parked under a waterfall. Steffi digs deeper into her sleeping bag, with just her nose sticking out. She puzzles over the treeplanter heap -- that felt nice, there were no barriers and no one seemed to mind being napped on top of by everyone else -- and tries to figure out how much she's made this week, then reminds herself to sharpen the scalping blade on the back of her hoe.

With a sharp blade, you can quietly even up the dangly roots that run over ten inches on your seedling, prevent J-roots and loss of income to disgruntled inspection. Some let you trim, some don't. With the ones that don't, you might go to their superiors about the catch-22 of hoe-trimming versus J-roots and the boss tells them to bring scissors and do the pruning for you on request. So when you do that, they hate you and things just go from bad to worse. Better you just look around, and as soon as they are preoccupied with something or someone else, *schwick! splop!* -- it's pruned and planted.

There's an inspector standing by Steffi's bunk, which is strange because the roof is only three feet away.

"So, Stef!" he says, smiling wickedly. "I have to ding you or you won't pay any attention!"

"Uhh, 'Scuze me? Tryna sleep here?"

"I know you are; that's just the problem. Lookit your line!"

With a sweep of his arm, Tatum clipboard in hand, the inspector's gesture takes in the soggy, slash-befouled hillside. All along Steffi's line the meticulously mineral-soil-scalped planting spots contain baked potato-and-bacon sandwiches, planted up to their waists and properly tamped.

Steffi can't see what's wrong with her sandwiches, and turns to the inspector to say so. But the inspector is now standing, arms akimbo, with his mouth open impossibly wide. From it there comes the sound of branches slipping past other branches, slapping faster and faster through larger branches: crackings, smashings, roarings.

Steffi's suddenly wide awake, and somehow she knows what the sound is. A tree is coming down, a fir, *huge*, old-growth. It's going to hit the truck and obliterate her little life from the earth.

There's nowhere to go. No time to wriggle out of the sleeping bag. The forest hulk, shedding tons of moss, lichens, limbs, branches, twigs, and rudely wakened birds, brushing aside hemlocks and alders as it comes, is here -- here now -- surely here now, to crush the yellow truck and its sweat-bemired occupant, oh-too-young-to-die. Now it strikes, splintering millions of, five hundred years' worth of, fibers --

-- and, umm, has missed the truck. The impact actually causes Rocinante to leap, perhaps a quarter of an inch, rocking on her axle springs. But there is, in here, no death.

In the morning:

"D'ja, uhhh, hear anything last night?"

Amy, sleepy-eyed, regards the newbie, almost amused.

"Blowdown, somewhere, maybe."

Steffi's obsessed with the derailed freight train of broken timber that interrupted her strange dream. In two days is her day off. She reconnoiters upstream from camp, following the creek till the trail threads out, snagging her way through viney maples and thimbleberry until she comes to it: a trunk seven feet thick, that has broken its neck among the boulders, leaving wracked hemlocks and cedars in a gap in the forest canopy just beneath the clouds.

It's more than a quarter of a mile from camp.

...

Burt and Chuck spend a good part of the next morning coaxing the crew-bus crummy to life. Chuck cranks the motor over while Burt fills a mayonnaise jar from the gas line, separates out the gas by slowly pouring it off the top of the water into a battered fuel can, then pouring the gas back into the truck's fuel tank. Then Burt sprays lighter fluid on the air filter, Chuck cranks the engine over again with the twelve-volt's last gasp, and the engine catches.

"Town. Gotta call in," says Burt to Steffi's raised eyebrow. Most of the crew, all the men anyway, pile in.

"Beer run!"

Oh, the joy.

Steffi's not that into beer. She spends the day wandering around the mountainside, poking her nose into boomer holes and tree hollows.

Amy and Juneen, also not very into beer, are packing the yurt's furnishings into a couple of galvanized trash cans.

Amy is twenty-three, pretty except for a broken front tooth, is round like a muscular apple, always wears overalls.

She speculates a lot without saying much of it aloud. Juneen is nineteen, taller than Amy, not nearly as strong but so focused she outproduces her. Juneen is, or was, a few years back, a runaway; ordinarily she would have wound up living under a bridge in Portland and dying of dirtied needles, but lucked into hard work in the woods instead. They both love being here.

Amy spots a blue hole in the sky and brings all the caulk boots out to dry in the sun, arranged in semicircles on old growth fir stumps. She keeps pushing the boots apart and back together on the stump.

"What are you doing?" asks Juneen, in the yurt doorway with a dented aluminum pitcher in one hand.

"Porkypines." Amy dreamily rearranges the last pair, and chums it together with a gigantic pair of wet sneakers.

"Come again?"

"In th' winter th' porkypines got cold, see? So they, they got together and one of 'em said, 'Look, we're all freezin' our butts off out here, how about we circle up and we'll all be warm.'"

"I can see a problem with that."

"Hush, that's th' point of th' story. So they circled up and they went to stickin' each other, on accident, an', like, 'Ooh.' an' 'Owie.' an' such, so they they spread out some -- "

"In the snow?"

Amy looks crushed. "Sooo, y'know this one, huh?"

"Not really, but you tell it so I can really see it."

"Uh-huh, well, so there they was freezin' again, so they went back 'n forth till they got some body heat but not stickery. And that's called The Origin of Manners or somethin' like that."

"Wow."

"Yeah. This crew, it's like that, everybody gives a little 'n takes a little. Even the new girl. So -- I guess I like it here."

"The new girl is nuts."

"We're all nuts, Juneen; you think any girl with any sense would be happy in this much mud?"

...

Steffi, meanwhile, deep in the shade of some big-leaf maples on the hillside, has knelt among the sword ferns, remembering a way of playing that she had in her childhood. She breaks fallen twigs so that each one is about the size of a new pencil, and sticks them in the ground side by side, until she's made a little pioneer stockade, complete with cabins and furniture inside the cabins --

"Steff-f-f-f-f-f!"

Woops. How long has she been out here?

...

Juneen and Amy want help with the yurt poles.

To dismantle a crew yurt, first remove the polyethylene walls, with their rips and burn holes all covered with duct tape, and roll them up. Take the shortest rafter, a ten-foot-long debarked and sun-dried lodgepole sapling, the one with no eyebolt holding it tensioned against the upper cable, and worry it till it comes loose in the interior of the yurt in your hands. It becomes a tool. With it, you can push up on the canvas roof from beneath, then walk the roof off to one side, exposing all the other poles to daylight.

Fold the roof so that its steel cap, which is also the flashing for the woodstove pipe, rests on top. Remove the other poles from the top of the upper cable, all but the four that have the cable threaded through them. Stack the rafter poles on the roof rack of the crummy, hanging out beyond the headlights and the taillights.

Now loosen the turnbuckle on the upper cable, unthread it, take the remaining four poles that are still jammed in the plywood donut ring that held the cap and stovepipe, and walk them over to the side, dumping the donut ring on the ground.

Next you undo the bottom cable's turnbuckle, gather up both cables, unbolt the door frame from the wall lattice, walk the lattice up flat, and place the remaining rafters, the door and door frame, the rolled-up plastic, the lattice, and the folded canvas roof on the crummy's roof rack and tie down the load with scraps of rope. It's tempting to use the wall cables, but you don't want to kink the wire rope.

Sounds complicated, but once you've done it you can get it down to twenty minutes with three women and two dogs.

Now this sounds like a strikingly ugly vehicle, and it is, but this is the Seventies -- cops won't pull the crummy over unless it actually dumps something on the freeway. Live and let live, more or less -- that was then.

Y'all don't know what I'm talking about, do ya?

...

After the kitchen is packed away in and on and behind the crummy, the rain starts up again, and they gather all the

boots that have been drying in the yurt and stash them under the owners' assorted vehicles.

"Hey," says Amy. "Y'know that warm spring we heard about? I found it on the district map."

"Yeah?" Juneen pushes her hair out of her eyes. She can feel it's stiff, gnarly, no shower for three weeks.

"Whaddya think? Stef, you got gas in your truck?"

Steffi's not sure.

Pay is by the job, and the jobs are three, six, eight weeks long. No one's been paid since the last time the crew went to Eugene, a hundred miles north. The next paycheck is probably a week away. Resources are slim. Gas for the trip to the next job will come into camp with Burt and Chuck in a fifty-five gallon drum.

Amy's feeling bright. "got some sawgas?"

"Maybe a half gallon."

"Cool! Wanna go hot tubbin'?"

Rocinante gets a drink of the darkened gasoline mixture and they're off.

...

Amy navigates, shining a flashlight on the map in the gathering gloom, in Rocinante's cab. She sits in the middle, even though she's wide, because her legs are shorter than Juneen's.

The headlights reflect, through the windshield wipers, from one forest service sign, then another. The signs indicate intersections; the roads are numbered rather than named. Two or four digits means, roughly, paved trunk roads. Three digits is a gravel spur road. They find the spur road they want.

"Kay, Stef, slow down; we want to go one-and-a-half miles and there should be a wide spot and a trail off to the left."

"How are we gonna see that? It's almost pitch black now."

"Shhh! Look. There's a wideout on the left. See a trail?"

"Not much. Looks like a piss-stop trail if anything."

"That's gotta be it. Not a lot of people know this is here."

Steffi pulls over and shuts off the engine. They push through the viney maples and ocean-spray at the roadside, getting wet through and cold, and, sure enough, it's a trail. Amy knows woods.

A couple of hundred feet into the darkness, they come to a tiny clearing among second-growth firs. In the middle is a dark little hole, about five feet across, with water in it, surrounded by trampled grass.

Steffi has doubts. "This is a hot spring? It's not, umm, steaming or anything."

"It's just a warm spring, silly, just hot enough for a good bath without cooking us. Touch the water."

Steffi kneels down and, sure enough, just like a drawn bath. Warm, not scalding. In all this rain in the middle of nowhere.

The fever for a washing up hits all three of them at once. Shoes, pants, overalls, shirts, and bras fall in a heap. Steffi can feel the cold pressure of the grass stems on her fanny and the heat of the water on her tired, scabbed shins. In moments, she's up to her neck, prone in the shallow and muddy water, lying with the back of her head pillowed on the bank.

All any of them can think of is that their poor, long-suffering pores are opening to the heat of the water ... ah, paradise.

Juneen sits up, washes her hair, lies down again, drawing the surface of the warm springs over her like a blanket.

The rain falls on their closed eyelids. No one says anything for a very long time. They're so blissed out, they could die here and miss it completely.



Back at camp, which would be around midnight, they discover that Burt and Chuck, along with the rest of Face Crew, have returned. There's a quick crew meeting by the light of the crummys' headlamps.

"So," says Chuck. "Got word. We'll hit Eugene tomorrow, get groceries, and head up to the Olympics."

"In ... in Washington?" asks Steffi, as if it were a long way away.

Chuck looks at her in pity for a moment. Then he looks a bit closer, and at Juneen and Amy as well.

"How'd you all get so *clean*?"

THE CONVOY mumbles and coughs its way up the Seattle freeway all day at forty-eight miles an hour, passed by irritated tractor-trailers and thousands of recent-model sedans filled with small bouncing children and exasperated parents.

All the traffic gives the crummy an especially wide berth with its stuffing of boxes of canned goods, sacks of grain, firewood, stove and stove pipe, and its roof groaning with racked hoedads and shovels, the long lodgepoles, and the yurt -- door, walls, roof, and ring folded to the extent possible and tied down tight with a variety of ropes.

Steffi is fifth in line with Rocinante, sipping at a carton of chocolate milk and listening to *Tubular Bells* on her eight-track. Somebody's dog is riding shotgun with her but sleeping on the job. A rich odor of wet fur and doggie breakfast permeates the cab. Steffi cracks the window.

In front of her is one of the crew trucks, with a tall plywood camper on its back. Next to the camper door a straight-backed chair with a wicker bottom is tied onto the bumper. The door opens and Burt climbs out, settles himself on the chair and lights up a smoke. Steffi finds this a little nerve-racking; should the truck hit any kind of a bump, Burt is liable to fly right under Rocinante's wheels.

Steffi shakes her head almost imperceptibly. Burt smiles.

...

The line of trucks pulls into the parking lot of the Ranger station in a driving rainstorm -- real drops for once, coming down big at a steep angle and stinging those who climb out of the cabs, stiff, and run to the station entrance. Steffi stays put, watching rivers of water pour down her windshield. The dog whines. She leans over and lets him out. His business is done in less than a minute, and he's whining to be let back in. Rain comes in with him, and the cab stinks worse than ever.

Someone comes running from the station. Steffi rolls down the fogged window and is pleased to see Israel, the black drummer, whom she hasn't seen since the party. Water is pouring from his dreads. "What the hey, Izz," she tells him, "come around and hop in." He does so. There's a commotion as he gently evicts the dog, who crawls under Rocinante, whining.

"Whoo! Wet, wet, wet. How ya doin'? Oh, waitaminnit, we met yet?" He grins.

Dark glasses on a dark day. But Steffi can feel his kindly eyes through the lenses. "At Slough Creek, you and the guy with the sax were doing the music."

"Ohhhhhh, yeah! *Brownies!*"

"I'll never live that down."

"Sure ya will. So, an-n-n-yway, been here since yesterday, got a campsite, meetin' with th' CO is happenin', I'm gonna get us lined up an' outta here so's we can set up camp before dark. Who's drivin' th' crummy?"

"Chuck or Juneen, I think."

"Gotcha. Don't run away, we'll pull out in ten or so."

He hops back out into the rain, remembers to put the dog back in the cab, and is off in the mists.

Steffi picks up a rag from the floor, mops the inside of her windshield, flicks the key in the ignition to cycle the windshield wipers, and looks out.

The mountains here are big. As in, way, way big. She leans over the steering wheel and looks up, putting a crick in her neck. Clouds, speeding, drag their ghostly hands through tiny trees that she *knows* are giants. She's sure nothing previous has been touched by those clouds since Japan.

Or maybe Mongolia, who knows?

⋮

The designated campsite is right on the river, an actual gated campground that the "forest circus" has unlocked for the crew. Everyone heads for a chosen driveway; Steffi picks the spot nearest the river.

Mostly the crew has been camping in gravel pits or sometimes among trees along a logging road. Such places are seldom level and settling in often consists of driving two wheels onto a couple of small piles of rocks. Here, she just parks and she's done. What a treat!

Letting the dog out to go find its owner and a meal, Steffi shrugs into a rain coat and rain hat, stretches and walks over to the water.

Woo. This river is high. As in *high*. And fast. And muddy. Rivers in the mountains, she knows by now, should not be muddy. She starts to climb down the bank for a better look in the gathering twilight, but thinks better of it. *One slip here and they'd never find me. And is that a tree going by?*

It is, and furthermore, there's a *bobcat* riding the broad trunk, looking bedraggled and scared. Not something you

see every day. On a hunch, Steffi focuses on a small rock by the water line and watches it, counting toward fifty. The water climbs over the rock and submerges it at twenty-three.

This is a flood.

She goes looking for people. They're already setting up the yurt; the lattice is in its circle and turnbuckles are being turned on cables. She's always hated interrupting anyone, but if she's going to start, now might be the time. "Uh-h-h, people ... "

"Steffi, ya wanta grab that there pliers?"

"Hang on, we have to look at the river, I think it's going to jump its banks."

"No."

"Mmm, yeah, I kinda think yes."

Burt goes over with her.

"Watch that little broken root there and count to thirty."

He does that. "Uh, oh," he says.

They run to the others and explain. Work on the yurt halts, then is reversed. As they work, they cast anxious glances toward the river bank. One trickle begins running between two stones onto the asphalt, then another.

A young man Steffi has barely met, named Yoder, has a huge Army surplus wall tent already set up, massive poles, ropes, tent stakes, camp bed and all. She pitches in with him dismantling it. Yoder is staggering around under his assorted burdens, shoulder-length blond hair dripping. By the time they have the canvas down, they're ankle deep in flood. The canvas fills with water and it takes eight people to load it in the kid's step-van. The river is up to the van's running board.

As everyone runs toward their assorted rigs to head out of the park, someone shouts out. "Jerry-up's bus is *floating*. And it's *locked*!"

Burt shouts back, across running water. "Where is he?"

"At that meeting with the CO's!"

"K, everybody go to the bus!" Burt runs to the crummy and draws two lodgepoles from the loosely tied bundle on its roof. Carrying these to the yellow Volkswagen van, he hands off one, then shoves the other underneath the bobbing vehicle's body. Soon there are eight people on the two poles, while others, Steffi among them, assist as best they can, some holding the van upright, others dragging it along by its bumpers and door handles. It's hauled up to the access road by brute strength.

"If the river gets this high," remarks Burt, "Jerry-up will just have to find himself a new home." He turns to look at the river, which now seems a quarter-mile across. The flood has enveloped the entire campground, and brown water is now moving across the campsites at river speed. "Hey, check this out!" He points.

Three waterlogged cows, legs in the air, float by, making pretty good time.

...

Someone has scouted out a higher spot -- a gravel pit, of course -- and the caravan inches up the mountainside in the dark. None of the crew has ever had to assemble the yurt in darkness before, but the need to sit by a warm fire in stormy weather can be a great motivator. Burt has everyone park in a wide circle and shine their headlamps inwards. The lattice frame and doorway, as well as the lodgepoles, are

assembled in record time. Steffi runs in with the last pole and humps the canvas roof over the pole frame as others drag the outer edges of the canvas across the building. The roof is spread, ready to be cabled onto the lattice.

At this crucial moment, with no plastic sheeting on the lattice to block the wind, a major gust from the storm moans across the nearby firs and digs under the roof.

The yurt lifts off, headed for the nearby canyon.

"Hang on!" shouts Burt.

Dozens of hands grasp the circular cable. Steffi, in the middle, gets to witness the entire Face crew dangling in midair from an impromptu parachute. Will they be drawn over the edge of the ravine with their house? The lattice starts dragging toward her. She drops the pole and exits the door under someone's armpit, and adds herself to the ring of human weights on the roofline.

The gust subsides. Everyone, without needing to be told, walks the yurt back together and ties the roof to the lattice with whatever they can get their hands on -- baling twine, shoelaces -- by the light of the headlamps, with the rain pouring down.

Juneen brings over the plastic. She and Steffi wrap the building from the doorway to the right and back again, while others tighten it down with Bungee cords. Chuck and Jerry-down, who are back from the CO meeting, with two other guys Steffi doesn't know, throw hay bales into the interior, cut the twine from the bales, and spread hay around the interior to make a floor. Someone's already in there loading the stove with kindling and firewood. A kerosene lantern is carried in, lit, and hung from the rafters. Buckets and chairs

are brought. The trucks' headlamps are extinguished, one by one.

People in raingear, carrying flashlights, utensils, food, water jugs, and musical instruments drift in, grinning, and make themselves at home, with wet wagging dogs at their feet. Crowding round the Airtight stove, which is already glowing cherry red, they shuck rain gear and sock hats and sit, heads steaming.

Once it's warm enough in the yurt for those so inclined to get up and move around, several do so and set up a card table and a propane stove. Hot oatmeal for dinner .

The two guys Steffi doesn't know are lying down in the hay, just outside the steaming circle. One of them is weaving his hands in the air and muttering to himself. "Who are they?" she asks.

"They're visitin' from Wildcat crew," says Chuck. He laughs wryly. "We made the mistake of lettin' 'em help rep the crew at th' meetin', not knowin' they'd dropped acid."

"Ohhh, no!" says someone across the yurt. Groans rise from the circle. "Do we still have a job?"

"Oh, yeah," says Chuck. "But it was a near thing. The fazoos got out the map, and Lon here -- " Chuck pokes the hand-weaver with the toe of his boot -- "says, 'waitaminnit' -- pokes at the map -- 'We need a contract adjustment.' 'Whattayamean,' says th' head fazoo. 'Swamps! Swamps all over this map! Alligators in them swamps!' says Lon."

He points at the other man, sleeping soundly. "Little Butch here gets out his big camera, starts pointin' it around the room. He takes a picture of the floor tiles." Chuck shakes his head. "We barely got out of there alive."

Jerry-up, a tall, thin, nervous man with long, black stringy hair, comes in from the night. "So, can anybody tell me how my bus went two hundred feet up the road from where I parked it?"

...

Late in the evening, after drums, flute and guitar have done their thing, mostly Dylan or Stones or Grateful Dead, Steffi, who is usually too shy to do group stuff, brings out her autoharp and fingerpicks. Jerry-down, the guitarist, re-tunes to the harp and asks her for chords.

"How about G, G7, D?"

"Sure thing." They practice a little bit, six-eight time, a riff on "Wreck of the Ninety-Seven."

"You know the words?" asks Jerry-down.

"Not too well."

"Whatcha got?"

"Not much. "Life is Like a Mountain Railroad, Careless Love, Old Smokey, Midnight Special. Red River Valley. You Are My Sunshine. Umm, Georgia Pines. And, uhh, I Never Will Marry."

"Woo, *old* stuff. Do that last one, I'll follow you."

"K." Steffi is shaking like a leaf; she's never done this in public. But Face is a family in some ways, so it doesn't really count. Time to pack up her stage fright and mail it off to limbo. She lays the harp back against her breasts and reaches for the strings.

*As I was a goin'
Down by the sea shore,
The wind it did rattle*

*The waters did roar.
I spied a fair maiden,
The water stood by.
She wept by the ocean
And thus did she cry:*

*"I never will marry,
I'll be no man's wife.
I'm gonna be single
all the days of my life."*

*She thrust her fair body
In the waters so deep,
And closed her blue eyes
In the waters to sleep.*

*"I never will marry,
I'll be no man's wife.
I'm gonna be single,
All the days of my life."*

*The fish in deep water
Swim over my head;
The shells on the sea floor
Will be my death bed."*

As the song ends, big, gray-bearded Lon sits up and stares at Steffi, bleary-eyed. "My frackin' god, girl, that's *hair-raisin'* stuff. Uhh, you married?"

She puts the harp down in her lap. "Was."

THE CONTRACT is plagued by snow.

This is a good thing, as it makes the inspectors sympathetic to the Hoedags, who show up morning after morning, stinking of camp life and weed smoke but ready to work in the cold and wet.

On the other hand, snow can shut the job down. If it's more than two inches deep, the inspectors will call it a day, as snow can ball up and fall into your hole with the tree roots, then melt later on and leave an air pocket which will kill the tree.

If it keeps snowing, you're out of a job till the next thaw.

Face Crew is all over the hill. Steffi is in the middle of the line. Above her she can see Murray and Bill, and two more people blurred by the weather. Below her is Israel, and she knows Juneen and Chuck are around the corner somewhere catching up the back. They're about a fifth of the way down the mountain from a landing at the top; she can hear the storm winds moaning as they comb the hair of the fir trees beyond the landing. The trees are waving at her, or rather bowing to her, bending at the waist; it's more than a little alarming.

The inspector, a paunchy guy named Mike, is atop a stump, leaning on his shovel, turned away from the wind. There's enough wind to rattle the fifty-foot tape measure hanging at his waist, and just enough snow on the wind to turn the back

of his orange vest white. He's yammering away at anyone within hearing.

"See, there was this little river, an' it was just over th' line. Th' veecee used it to run their guns 'n ammo an' shit, an' we could see 'em all th' time, but couldn't shoot at 'em 'cuz of th' frackin' *rules of engagement*. 'N we wuz up there 'n along come this *lon-n-n-n-g* boat piled high with mortar-round boxes, 'N I radioed in to th' colonel 'n reported it 'n asked for authorization to hit 'em, 'n he sez, Mike they are in a no-fire zone, 'n I sez, but colonel, 'n he sez, Mike, listen carefully: no *fire zone* -- 'n a light come on in my head, an' I sez, Rob, set us down over here by that big rock 'n we loaded up that rock and flew over there 'n dropped it right in th' middle of that boat 'n down she went."

Israel unbends himself, tree in hand, and looks up the hill at Mike. "Well, Mike, that's all well 'n good but that was then and this is now, right?"

Mike seems kind of crushed by this and sits down on the stump. Steffi's right in front of him, sliding a snowy little tree into the its hole between two huge roots. She packs the tree with her boot and looks up.

The inspector has tears in his eyes. "God, I wish I coulda fought in a *popular* war."

"Sorry, sir." Thinking of nothing else to say, she moves on to the next spot.

Several spots later, she realizes she's outplanting Bill, making a bow in the line. She can see his head above a snow-crusted log -- no hard hat -- bowl-cut blond hair -- and his round shoulders. If she bumps back, it will make matters worse; she needs to pick up her dag and walk up between

Bill and Murray. But it's steep; this part of the hill is more rock face than anything else.

Above the log, Bill has found pay dirt. He swings his dag and pulls back on the handle.

His elbow touches the log.

It turns and starts walking sideways down the hill.

Whatever comes down the mountain in an uncontrolled fall, be it boulder, tree trunk, or tree planter, the universal warning is "*rock*", screamed at the top of one's lungs. Bill is screaming it, Mike is screaming it, and Steffi, running sidehill, is screaming it. The log collects her and down the mountain they go, Steffi over backwards on top of a lot of sliding scree, the log on top of Steffi.

It's not a *huge* log, maybe twelve feet long and two in diameter. But it's waterlogged and making good time. If ever Steffi should be terrified, it should be now. But there's no time for that. The sky goes by for what seems hours, in slow motion, then she drops into a hollow, the log goes on alone and tears itself up on a stump with a bang like a movie explosion.

Steffi's young enough, up to this point in her life, to still believe she's immortal. *Gee, maybe not? Was this it?*

There's total silence. No, her ears are ringing. She's watching blue spots circling in front of her eyes. Or, no, maybe that's just the snow.

How peaceful. How beautiful. If I have to go, this is not at all a bad way.

Bill's face hovers over hers. Jerry-up's does, too, which she would not have expected to see; he'd been planting nearly a quarter of a mile away on the other side of the draw. Her fall was that interesting?

Steffi's brain starts working again. She focuses on Jerry-up's classic Brooklyn face, which to her looks like some of the better paintings of Jesus.

Jerry-up's lips are moving. She can just make out his accent. "Don't move, Stef. We'll getchuh the stretchuh!"

"Uhh. I don't think I'm broken, really. Just sit me up?"

"You're kidding, Stef, that thing rode you a hundred feet!"

"Well, its end was on the ground, I dunno."

Against their better judgment, Bill and Jerry-up shift Steffi to sit up against a large rock. Fifteen people are standing round her in a circle, sympatico-eyed.

"Stef, no hard feelin's?" asks Bill.

"I got up under you, Bill; my fault."

Chuck comes down-slope and goes on one knee to look Steffi over; he gently lifts her eyelids and looks into her eyes.

"Not dilated. But I think we oughta at least put ya in th' crummy."

"Chuck, this unit is good money. I don't want to go up there and get all stiff. How about we switch places, and I be the non-planting foreperson?"

He's not saying no. Steffi takes this as a good sign.

...

The unit's done by a late lunchtime and the crew drives around the mountain to another one, eating in their seats. Steffi's a little sore now. No, she's a lot sore. Back, arm and leg. She pulls off her left boot; it's bugging her. The others climb out for a look-see.

Steffi watches through the dirty window. The sun is out. They're strategizing, laughing, patting one another on the

back, then come back for their dags and bags. Juneen pops into the front of the crummy for her hard hat.

"What's up?" asks Steffi.

"Unit's half rock face, half gravy, no slash. Hundred dollar afternoon for sure."

"We made that much this morning. It's after two now."

"This one's twice as good. It's twenty-two acres but we can get it all done before dark! Y'comin'?"

"I dunno. I'm stiffening up."

"I don't wonder. Hell of a fall. We all thought you were killed." She pats Steffi's shoulder.

She looks like she's gonna stay and talk. "I'm okay," says Steffi. "Go break the bank."

"Yeah." Juneen grins, pops her steel hat on and disappears.

For awhile Steffi's okay just sitting. But then she thinks a little sunshine'd be nice for that foot. She hops toward the front of the crummy, holding onto the backs of the seats.

Once outside, curiosity gets the better of her. What's the unit like, really? Grabbing a planting shovel for a crutch, she hobbles over to the edge of the road.

People are scattered out far below, with Mike standing on a stump above them maybe two hundred feet down from the road. About a sixty percent slope. There's a lot of trees in the ground already; as Juneen said, it's all gravy. Suddenly there are dollar signs in Steffi's eyes.

In a wink she's back in the crummy and trying to get her boot on. No way. Her foot's now two or more sizes too big. She like roomy boots and layered socks but her feet are big to begin with. She rummages around and finds one of Burt's tennis shoes. Size eleven, men's.

Perfect fit.

Back out in the sunlight, she takes her tree bag, hopping with the shovel, over to the inspector's green truck, opens the camper shell, drags a paper tree sack over and lifts out four damp bundles of trees. Two hundred. Should be just enough for the amount of ground that's left down there. This unit will pay thirty cents a tree easily; sixty bucks in one afternoon if she hustles.

Diving off the landing will be the easy part; in all that soft dirt she can just schluss on down to the line. She aims for Mike, who hasn't moved.

"Hey."

"My god, girl, I thought you was hurt!"

"Not so much; may I use a shovel?"

"Well, there's no grass here; I don't see why not."

"Where's the action?"

"Everybody went left and they'll come back here 'n go right. You get under the cliff here, you can work for hours and save 'em a climb out."

"Thank you, sir."

Steffi slides and slips down the edge of the bulging rock face, planting trees as she goes, and gets into her very own acre at the bottom of the clear-cut. She crutches from spot to spot, ten-by on a nine-by, driving the shovel deep with her hands, blade facing backwards the tree-planter's way.

The sun sinks west. Steffi's bag gets lighter with each hobble.

There's movement overhead. She looks up, up, and up, and there's Mike at the top of the cliff. He gets out his clipboard and looks down. He waves his pen at the acre. "So, what's it like down there?" His pen hovers over the clipboard.

He doesn't want to climb down here. I'm throwing my own plot!

"Umm, eleven for ten and one loose tree."

Mike scribbles in the clipboard, closes the aluminum cover, then grins. Steffi can see the grin all the way from here, even in the shade of his hard hat.

"All right," he says. "Not too bad, but watch it with them loose trees!"

A bit later, the piece is done and her bag is empty. She'd better start climbing. It's gonna be slow.

Casting a long shadow, Steffi works her way round to the right and up. Before long, she hooks up with Burt. He's throwing his dag ahead of him into the dirt and pulling himself up by the handle; it's that steep. Little Butch, right behind him, is taking a picture with that big camera. *How does he keep his dreads out of the frame?*

"Is that *my* shoe you're wearing?" asks Burt, eyebrows raised.

"Mmm-hmm, I'll wash and dry it tonight." Little Butch snaps Steffi's picture. She glowers at him.

"How come it fits yuh?"

"Reasons of state."

Around a big stump comes Bill. He clambers up on the stump and points to the sky with his hoe handle. "Lookie."

They turn and squint. Out of the low sun comes a bald eagle.

Then another.

Then another.

In a few moments, there are all of seven bald eagles, turning and turning in the pink light.

Little Butch takes their picture.

From around the corner, Lon's hoarse voice rings out.

*Oh, say, can you see
By th' dawn's early light ...*

"It ain't dawn, Lonnie!" That would be Chuck.

"Don't matter," replies Lon. "Been a helluva day, huh?"

He picks up where he left off. Others join in, including Mike, the government man.

Steffi takes another agonizing hop upwards. *Yes. A helluva day.*

⋮

Steffi awakes and, uh-oh, no can move. Oh yeah, run over and half killed by a log yesterday.

She drags over the stick that holds Rocinante's back door open and props up the door. The light coming in is surreal, upside down or something and bright. How long has she been asleep?

There are camp-breaking noises all around her. Amy sticks her head in over the tailgate.

"Hey you."

"Hey. What's up?"

"Snowed out. There's four inches *here*. Gang's gonna head for town and stay in a hotel. Ygonna come?"

Steffi doesn't want to admit she's immobilized. "Uhh, tell ya what, I could stay here and watch the camp? Y'think?"

"Loner."

"So I'm weird; I don't have a corner on that."

"True. Y'got all you need?"

"I think. Well, there's plenty in the yurt, right?"

"We packed it all up in case of bears. All the kitchen goodies are in Yoder's van. Help yourself."

Amy's head disappears, replaced by Lon's. Whiskey and hint of Prince Albert. Whiskey at seven in the morning?

"Ya good?"

"Oh, sure."

"I c'n bring ya some coffee, there's still some from breakfast."

"Umm, yeah."

Lon disappears. Steffi tries to sit up, but she's totaled. In a bit she thinks Lon is back, but it's Chuck's hand putting the mug on the end of her camper shelf along with a can of beef chili. He seems to know she can't sit up. "Listen, we could be gone a week with this snow. More comin'."

"I'd like that, it'd be like a vacation. I don't much go for town, you know."

"Yeah. Uhh, listen, Stef, while we're gone, be thinkin' how if we hadna snowed out, we'd be short one hand -- they'd shut us down. In th' Hoedags, it's not just about our own totals. Right?"

Steffi feels her face burning. "Umm. Right."

"Be careful, now."

Thank you for the coffee and chili."

"Yeah."

Presently the crummy goes through its litany of moisture-laden engine coughs, then chugs out of camp.

An absolute silence falls.

Steffi pulls the stick and Rocinante's back door shuts with a bang, cold light coming in through its window.

She pulls the top of her sleeping bag over her head.

...

It's another morning before Steffi feels ready to venture forth. She tests her body by shifting her hips, one side and then the other. Not too bad. Bladder, though, oh, lord!

Her nose is pretty cold. The light coming in her window is blazing. She rearranges her Princess pillow and hunches up in bed. Hungry. Can opener, chili. Spoon, spoon. Where's the big spoon? Ah. She digs at the chili fiercely. The spoon hits the chili with a clunk and bends almost double.

Whoa! how cold was it last night?

She's going to need fire. This is out of Rocinante's class. Besides, got to make some yellow snow!

Wrestling her way out of the sleeping bag, she scrabbles for her boots and then lifts the camper door.

The scene that awaits her is a shock, even though she has to squint to see it.

The sky is an impossible shade of blue. Beneath that the fir trees are not at all as she remembers them; everything is bent down with thick pillows of white.

The yurt is suffering from the load of snow. Wading knee deep, Steffi cuts a willow wand for a walking stick, and a longer willow, branches on, for a broom, and clears the roof as best she can. Then she hobbles in, sits on an aluminum veggie-oil can, and builds a fire in the Airtight. Not till the yurt's warmed does she raid the step-van for bacon and potatoes.

...

Walk time. Steffi grabs her walking stick and makes her way painfully up from the entrance of the gravel pit to a little

knob above the road. From here she can see, to the east, the river that was in flood, cows and all, only a week ago, and to the north, the ouch-white Olympics, just peeping over the shoulder of a tall, calendar-perfect ridge. West and south is a wide valley full of fir trees, alders, willows, and maples, all outlined in white. She can see a few small animal tracks nearby, but nothing's moving. In camp, there are more than a dozen humps that are the crew vehicles, and the brushed-off yurt, with its central chimney emitting the only smoke in the valley. The smoke drifts down toward the river, turns, and follows it toward the Hood Canal, and, somewhere over there, Mount Rainier. A full moon is rising.

EVERYBODY'S PACKING camp yet again.

Steffi's snow vacation has convinced her she needs a little more space -- crew food, for example, is okay up to a point, but twice the bucket brought down into the bottom of a unit has contained nothing but onion sandwiches, and while communism is all well in its place, she'd like to have her own fire to sit by some evenings. A step-van, or maybe even a school bus. She did well enough in the Olympics to afford something for herself.

The Magruder brothers know just the thing. "Talk to Murray. He has a friend on the Stones crew, wants to get out of the woods, has a nice rig."

Murray, thin-faced, mustachioed, and intellectual, is half out of the woods himself -- wants to go back to school after this season and be a professor of music or something. Afraid the planting will dull the talents in his brain and hands. He lays aside his guitar as Steffi comes up to him in the yurt, listens a bit, and rubs his chin.

"Cat Man has a rig, yeah, but he wants fifteen hundred for it. A little steep, maybe. How about my truck?"

Murray's truck has a taller camper than Steffi's, and with a stove and stovepipe, too, but it looks like an outhouse, is even darker than Rocinante inside, and stinks of dogs and cigarettes. She winces, but he's not offended. "I'll give yuh th' number. Y'get to Eugene, try Cat Man."



Cat Man is a little guy, about two-thirds Steffi's height, shaggy-maned and a bit of a showman.

"Here she is, ain't she lovely?" He extends his arm in a sweep that's like the raising of a theater curtain.

It's a two-ton flatbed truck with dual wheels on the back, very tall. On the truck bed there's a house.

A real house! Cat Man shows off his carpentry: maple flooring, cedar interior, skylight, double doors with divided lights, windows ditto, cedar shake exterior. Airtight stove with pipe flashed through the ceiling. A set of six steps, made from two-by-eights, provides access. One entire side wall folds out to make a stage; he'd kept an upright piano inside at one time and had entertained notions of traveling with a band, medicine-show style.

The front end of the house is a deep blue blunt-nosed cab with much of the engine underneath the floorboards. The cab's height is a bit intimidating for Steffi at first. Cat Man shows her how to stand on the running board, grasp the chromed grab bar, and swing herself up onto the seat. The steering wheel, which is huge, nestles right up against her rib cage almost. There's no seat belt.

"Your windshield wipers are vacuum-powered; they go slower at low revs and faster at high revs. There's five forwards and, get this, three reverse. She can't go very fast but the gas tank is huge; you can run her all day without stopping."

"What ... what year is this thing?"

"Nineteen Forty-seven Chevy, but the engine is newer and has just been rebuilt. Here's all the receipts."

Steffi likes it, but at fifteen hundred? She smells mechanic work in her future "What do you drive?"

"Nothing right now; I need to downsize. Believe it or not, this has been my sole source of transport, along with a motor scooter."

"Well ... what about we look at my pickup?"

...

Steffi had looked about. She'd need a little more stuff. In here she'll rattling around and she's not quite used to it. She's never actually owned a home other than Rocinante's homemade canopy. Cat Man had not provided for shelves and cabinetry.

They'd dickered only briefly, then swapped titles on the vehicles. Steffi's new house cost five hundred dollars and Rocinante.

It *had* felt like a betrayal. The faithful yellow pickup had tugged at Steffi's heartstrings the whole time she was unloading.

The foam mattress, queen size, had fit perfectly into her new bedroom, an extension of the house built over the cab of the ancient truck. On the mattress she'd piled not only her sleeping bag, blanket and pillow but also very nearly all her possessions, then closed and padlocked the glass doors, swung herself into the cab, and rolled tentatively away with a hoot of the quaint horn and a wave.

First stop, Goodwill. She finds a wall bracket for her kerosene lamp, a copper bottomed pot, a Cold Handle skillet that looks like it should just fit the eye on the Airtight, three

bowls, a replacement tablespoon, a tea kettle, three mugs, and six nice brass coat hooks.

Also from the book section, an acceptable *Three Pillars of Zen* with only one corner of the cover chewed off. She's hoping it will help her survive this move toward the middle class.

...

After the coat hooks are installed, and Steffi's chore coat and rain gear and autoharp hung, she starts building "window seat" cabinets and a desk. Her skills are in the "good enough" category; the corners are crooked, but everything is stoutly hinged and stuff can be stored away.

At the desk, by lamplight, she will write in her journal at night and read, on good days, Paul Reps, Gary Snyder and D.T. Suzuki, there being a shortage of Zen nuns getting published.

On bad days, Plath.

Herr Lucifer, Herr God.

...

Steffi finds a scrap of one-by-six and carves on it: *Ritz Hotel*. This she nails up over the back door.

She pats the housetruck on on its fanny. "Let's go."

...

With the Olympics done, and the weather changing, crews are spreading out to cover contracts in the Rocky Mountains, a phenomenon known as the Spring Tour.

Face Crew is off to Idaho. Steffi stops at the "almost wholesale" grocery and picks up five boxes of canned this-n'-that and a fifty-pound sack of rice. With rice, dandelions, chickweed, miner's lettuce, and the like, she knows she can go a long time without having to come in to town. The contract, she's heard, is a day's drive from *anywhere*. She climbs into the blue-and-chrome cab of the Ritz and heads up the Columbia Gorge.

Wind is coming downstream today; the Ritz's big blunt nose is an easy target for a headwind and, heavy as it is, the housetruck sways a little, bucking its way east. Steffi would like to be thrilled at the scenery -- Rooster Rock, Multnomah Falls, the giant dams, the rimrock -- but she feels she's hanging on for dear life. And fifth gear seems to top out, here, at forty miles an hour. A hill appears in the distance and it hangs there on her horizon for what seems like ages. A seagull passes, making better time than the chugging engine.

Steffi misses her tape player. A little bit of *Blue* or *The Low Spark of High-heeled Boys* would help her pass the miles. She sings to herself, bits about Carey getting out his cane and she'll put on some silver.

Night falls as the Ritz drones on; a town's lights creep over the horizon and just hang there, seemingly unable to come closer.. Steffi checks the gas gauge; it's leaning on empty. Damn! She'd meant to get jerry cans at the army surplus, but it was a stop she hadn't managed to make. Ease off on the throttle; lower revs. Climb the grade. As soon as you top the grade, take out of gear and freewheel, idling. As you bottom out, slip back into fifth, listen for the sweet spot in the revs, take it down to fourth, repeat.

The town's lights reappear, still no closer by the look of them. An eighteen wheeler groans past with a red VW "bug" drafting in its tailwind.

The engine coughs.

Coughs again. Starts dying.

O-o-o-kay, that's it. Steffi takes it out of gear and drifts into the emergency lane on a faint downgrade, nursing a few hundred more feet out of the big truck's inertia.

What to do? She doesn't want to hitch to the town at night. Or walk. Much of what's going going by is pickup trucks with a couple of cowboy hats driving; too much to handle if it's the wrong color hat.

She remembers the warm springs. Oh, yeah! Sawgas! It can get her closer to town, maybe a safer walk by the light of the mercury vapor lamps on the rampway.

She climbs in the back door, pulls the bolt pillow off the tool locker, lifts the lid, and picks up the bleach bottle in which she mixes and keeps the stuff.

Aww, empty.

Oh, hey, the saw! She hefts out the old McCullough, climbs down and runs around to the big square gas tank.

Oops, can't reach with the saw; the leading edge of the house is in the way.

Hmm.

Back to the house, grab hard hat from locker.

It's a blue plastic one, cap style. Steffi doesn't like it much, prefers her Sou'wester rain hat, but has it along for any saw work, such as 'falling' small snags to get dry firewood for the yurt. Looks like it'll do.

She runs the hat round to the fuel tank, empties the saw into the hat, empties the hat into the gas tank.

Puts her house in order, jumps on the running board, lifts herself into the cab by the grab bar, turns over the engine. It catches. She checks the big driver-side rear view mirror, stays in the emergency lane, ascends through the gears, babies the throttle, thirty five miles an hour all the way to the ramp, gears down, climbs the ramp, crosses the highway to the station, and runs out of gas right at the pump.

She's definitely gonna buy a couple of long-necked gas cans here, price no object.

Gas station attendant eyes her up and down. "Where's your guy?"

"Guy?"

"Big rig like this."

Jerk doesn't know a Hoedag when he sees one. Maybe she'll buy the cans at the next place.

...

Idaho! The Rockies! The mountains, the trees, the smells through the open window are different. The yellow soil, full of mica and pyrites, glitters. The firs are dusty, and in place of the ubiquitous cedars of the Cascades and Olympics, there are light green conifers, all putting out new needles, which Steffi learns later are called "larches."

She pulls into Pierce and it's night again. All the cars in town are at the only two-story building, which is covered with Christmas lights and a big sign, "Grand Re-opening."

Hungry. Might be a meal to buy in there.

The front door has those swinging shutter-like thingies like in the movies. Steffi can't believe it. She climbs down and crosses the street with a little trepidation, images from "High

Noon" going through her head. What's it gonna be, a brass rail, spittoons, and poker?

Steffi looks in. No, it's about a hundred people, all ages, and there's a huge *buffet*, long tables laid end to end. The room is exuding immense affection. An older guy, all paunch and walrus mustache, notices her. "Gonna stay out there all night? S'okay, all on th' house for th' grand openin'."

No kidding? Steffi comes in and gains three pounds.

...

The road from Pierce to camp is only ninety miles long, but requires almost as much driving time as from Portland to Pierce. It's purely a jeep track.

Ritzy doesn't like it. She's fourteen feet tall and ten wide, and leans out alarmingly on the curves. Something has come loose in the back and is rolling around seasick. Steffi tries second, tries third, tries second, tries third again. No gear is happy. Glittering dust rises in the rear and is pulled forward by a tailwind, covering everything inside and out. Steffi can feel the grit between her teeth when they're rattled by the washboarding on the grades.

Here's a corner so tight someone's hung up a polished hubcap or something so drivers can see if anyone's coming around from the other side. Ritzy has to jockey back and forth five times to negotiate it.

Steffi finds a wide-out a little farther along, gives the truck a needed break and steps over to the drop-off. River's about two hundred feet below. In the middle of the current, there's a little raft using fifty-five gallon drums for flotation, with a tiny cabin on one end and a mess of chuffing machinery on

the other. Two guys are running some kind of bucket chain from the river bottom into a gadget that rocks back and forth.

One of the guys grins up at her. He has only one leg. Maybe he's dredging for a new one. The pursuit of happiness in the Land of the Free.

...

One unit is most of this contract. Camp is squeezed onto the landing; its a high place, and there are snowdrifts.

At sunset, Ritzy shoulders her way, barely breathing, past the yurt. Juneen and the Magruders come out to help block Ritzy up level.

Steffi's home again.

She drags the steps out of the back doors with Juneen and bolts them to the doorstep. "What have we got?"

"Three hundred twenty acres. It's a short job; we have to make twenty acres a day and there's only going to be thirteen of us."

"We can do an acre and a half average, can't we?"

"Some places we can, but these trees are jelly-rolls."

"What's that?"

"See that canvas shade-house behind the yurt? The suspectors put a slurry of vermiculite and water in the barrels, dip the trees, spread them out on burlap and then roll up the burlap and pin it with a nail, like a diaper. Those rolls are heavy and it means more bag-ups. Slows us down."

"What's it for?"

"I know you won't believe it, 'cuz there's all this snow, but it's not like the Olympics. It will get hot out there at midday. This will cool the trees till they're in the ground."

"Well, live trees beat dead trees."

"Yeah, but th' slurry hurts yer back. Worst part is, th' suspectsors get grumpy rolling th' trees, 'n they're apt t'take it out on *us*."

"Oh. Oh well, we're here. Seeya in the morning?"

"You bet."

Steffi climbs in through the double doors and checks out the damage. Not too bad. Mostly cans and potatoes rolling around, books dumped. She steps up on the window seat nearest the bedroom, digs her lamp chimney out from under her pillow, and brings it over to the lamp. Crank wick up, light with match, install chimney, roll wick down to the sweet spot.

Yellow light floods the room. It's a little chilly; she loads up the Airtight with a few splits from a cedar shake and some newspaper, gets them burning merrily, and adds a couple of chunks of fir that hitched with her all the way from western Washington.

As Steffi is sweeping the glittery dust out the back door, Yoder squeezes past the yurt in his widebody step-van.

Steffi's at his door before he has rolled to a stop. "Gonna put up that tent?"

He leans wearily out the window. "Where?"

A Magruder arrives from the yurt. "It's pretty tight here; and we have to leave room for the suspectsors to park, too."

"Maybe I'll just sleep in the van."

"Hang on and we'll level you up right there."

"You will?"

"Course we will. Still kind of a newbie, are ya?"

THE NEXT couple of weeks are like a dream to Steffi; the jelly rolls are so heavy, and the days so hot, that she has little sense of living in a camp in general, or in her house in particular. As she's putting in a tree, and finding a rock or stick, as required by the contract, to put next to the south side of its little trunk for a spot of summer shade later in the year, she wonders if she remembered to water her little jade tree that she bought for her 'kitchen' windowsill, or to close the doors behind her as she trudged, in the gray dawn, to the shade house to bag up.

She unbuckles her web belt, slides out of the punishing tree bag and places it in the shade of a tall stump, then digs out a shallow hole in front of the bag to sit in and dangle her feet downslope; an impromptu chaise lounge.

Burt is planting through along her line. Yoder, not carrying a dag and bag, is following along watching Burt and asking questions. He spots Steffi and comes over to sit with her.

"What are you up to?" asks Steffi.

"I'm trying to learn how he does it. He's putting in a thousand trees a day, and I'm only at, like, three hundred. Even you, you do six sometimes."

"So, did he show you anything new?"

"Well, he has no wasted motion. Makes every step count. And doesn't seem to stop for lunch." After a moment of silence, Yoder looks at Steffi imploringly. "I *try* to do those

things. It doesn't seem all that complicated. But I feel like I'm just stumbling around out here."

"Burt grew up on a ranch, Yodie. You're from, I think I heard, Newark?"

"Yeah."

"And you're how old?"

"Seventeen."

"Bet ya've never been anywhere but school till you got that van."

"Uhhh, yeah. Well, I've sailed a boat some, on the Chesapeake."

"Well, then, nothing time won't cure. From what I've seen, tree planting is just like being on the water. Any sailor has to get his sea legs on the first voyage. Burt has hill legs. We all do."

"It's *your* first year, too, Stef, how come you caught onto it so fast?"

"Lots I *don't* know yet. But I'm a country girl from the red hills of Georgia ... and ... "

"And?"

"I'm an 'only.' And my dad really, *really* wanted a boy."

"Oh. I *think* I know what you mean."

"Well, put it this way; if you've shot squirrels and cleaned them for Brunswick stew, you can adapt to a lot of things."

Yoder blinks. "I'm a vegetarian."

...

The inspectors are difficult at first. They keep wanting to look in everyone's bag to see if anyone's unrolled their trees and hidden the burlap somewhere. But, while nobody's

perfect, the Hoedags, as putative self-employed persons who want to take pride in their work, and who think of themselves as environmentalists to some extent, want their trees to *live*. They look for stumps and logs to plant a tree to the north of, nestled between roots and stones, with all-day shade on the all-important root collar. They argue for a looser interpretation of the specs in order to wide-out or tighten down the spacing to find such spots. The C.O., who putt-putts round the unit on a green ATV, gets it and relents. With morale improved on the hill, the crew, which had fallen behind, begins to make up ground.

But there's still an issue; it erupts at a camp meeting.

Amy leads off. "There are some people here, you know who you are, plant a lot of trees all the time and make really good money because it's by the piece. But some of us feel like it should be by the hour because, even though we're slower, we help the crew meet quota every day. If there were just you six or eight fast ones, *you* couldn't work. So *we're* vital. But we get penalized for it for not being built like football players."

"Is this a girl-guy thing?" asks Murray. "'Cuz Stef makes good money and she's a girl."

"I'm only average," puts in Steffi. "When you make eighty bucks, I make sixty-five, and I'm okay with that, s'all."

"But," says Amy, "I've been here like *forever* and I put up the yurt 'n take it down 'n make town runs 'n split kindling and make a lot of the breakfasts ... "

"Which are always eggs 'n broccoli," someone says in the back. "'N I *hate* eggs 'n broccoli."

"Don't interrupt, I have the floor. But I'm only making, like, thirty dollars a day, and I gotta ask, am I digging myself a hole just to *be* here?"

"Look, if it's by the hour it's not worth it for *me* to be here," replies Burt. "Why should I make, like fifty a day when I can be on a crew where I'd make eighty or a hundred?"

Jerry-up has been listening quietly. He raises his hand.

Like Steffi, he's not a huge producer, but has been making out okay. He's in it for some aspects of the lifestyle, she thinks. And she's learned to pay attention to what he has to say. Almost thinks of him as her Guru from Brooklyn.

He gets the floor and stands up from the hay bale where he's been sitting. He spreads his hands. God, the guy really does look like those old paintings of Jesus. "Hey! I hear where everybody's comin' from." He gestures around the room. "Each of us is a body in the crummy, like Amy says. And we help out around camp and keep it from becomin' a nightmare, even though that doesn't pay nothin.' On the other hand, without at least half the crew putting out eight hundred to twelve hundred trees a day, we'd fall so far behind the Forset Circus would shut us down. So high production is high value too, but it's gotta have an incentive. Burt's got a little place out near Greenwood an' so do the Magruders; they're gonna run *cows* some day. Crew loyalty is not gonna buy those cows all by itself. They could be doing other work, like Burt says."

"You got a motion?" asks Chuck.

"Sure. Have the treasurer take the total payment for each unit and divide it in half. Pay out one half by the hour and one half by the tree."

"Huh?" asks Burt, who sees dollars signs being flushed away. "How th' hell's that an *incentive*?"

"It's called being a cooperative. Look ... *you* pay your low-rollers something to be in the crummy. Keeps the contract open. Your low-rollers pay the high-rollers to stuff the hillside with trees. *Also* keeps the contract open. It's better than by the piece for Amy, but better than by the hour for you."

"I dunno." Burt is trying to work out how much he'd lose by being here.

"Was there a motion in all that?" asks Chuck.

Juneen, who's secretary, chants from her scribbled notes. "Have treasurer take total payment for each unit and divide it in half. Pay out half by the hour, half by the tree."

"Is that right?" Chuck asks Jerry-up.

"Uhh, yeah."

"Discussion to the motion?" Chuck asks the circle of dirty faces round the interior of the yurt.

Jerry-down, a bigger and slower-thinking guy than Jerry-up, rises in place and is recognized. "Umm ... every unit is diff'rent. So, y'know, like ... we get to th' landing, look it over 'n vote right there. Lots of slash and non-plantin' spots? By th' hour. Kinda average? Half-'n' half. All gravy? By th' piece."

"That an amendment?" asks Chuck.

"Uhhh. Sure, why not."

Chuck looks at Juneen.

"I make that pay out each unit by vote on its merits, hour, half-and-half, or piece."

"Wow, good job, Junie. That about right, Jerry?"

"Yeah. Umm, yeah."

"Discussion to th' amendment?"

"I like it," says Isaiah. "Gravy units will help th' Magruders buy cows. "Slash units will help Amy get paid to crawl through slash, which is a thing she does, like, a lot. It's equitable." Anything Isaiah says tends to wrap up a discussion. People can feel consensus building. "And ... I call the question."

"On the motion with the amendment?"

"That is cor-r-r-rect."

The motion, as amended, passes. The treasurer is going to have a lot to keep track of, but Steffi thinks it will be worth it. Well, she *hopes* it will. She was elected crew treasurer only a week ago, and math is not her strong point.

...

The sun angles down among the larches on the western ridges, lengthening the shadows. There's an evening star.

"What are you gathering up all that orange stuff for?" Steffi asks Willard. Willard, a quiet guy who's at every contract but has little to say and has apparently no legal address, is dragging a bunch of "orange stuff" off a stump into his empty tree bag.

"It's, it's called 'calf's brains' -- it's a - a - a mushroom. Almost. Almost as good as morels and, and it's, it's all over the place here, fuh-fuh-free.. Try it, you'll ... you'll like it."

Willard's recommendation carries some weight. He's always returning to camp from somewhere with a grouse or a trout in his tree bag. He seldom seems to need to make a town run. A peculiarity of the guy is he forages, hunts and fishes this rugged region year round.

Barefoot.

Plants trees barefoot, too. Some people give him a wide berth but Steffi likes him. Something about him reminds her of her own childhood, especially the part where she ran away from home and built her own wigwam in the dead of winter.

Steffi finds her own orange-crowned stump and rakes the fungi toward herself with her dag. She's got a plastic bag left over from lunch and dumps the goods into it, tying the end off. She's got fifty trees to go and doesn't want to get the mushrooms all gritty.

In the evening, Steffi builds up the fire from the morning's coals in the Airtight and puts on her Cold-Handle skillet with the usual sliced potatoes in olive oil with Italian seasoning. Then she totes over the baggie from her tree bag, snips the calf's brains into the skillet with scissors, and stirs it all with a chopstick, listening to the sizzle.

When dinner's done, she brings the skillet, with a fork, over to her desk, where she has a book open on a kind of easel. The book is by Ed Abbey, and she's got it open to the page where he climbs to a spot in the desert, atop an almost totally unclimbable pinnacle, that he's sure no one has ever reached before, only to find a clearly delineated arrow, made of small stones, pointing to absolutely nowhere.

This, she thinks, savoring the calf's brains, is the life.

...

The crew wants to finish the contract in the next two days. They offer to split into two groups, if the C.O. will allow them to work that way. He will; what's more, his people need

to go to a fire training and they are willing to drop off the trees in the shade at the units and let the Hoedags finish the job without "supervision." They'll be inspected later, after they've already long gone. The last two units are very far apart; one is eleven acres and the other is twenty. The low rollers will go to the eleven and the high rollers will go to the twenty, and camp primitively on site, staying till the unit's done, then rolling back to the crew camp to pack up and go away.

Steffi's not a high roller by any stretch, but she's encouraged to go to the twenty with them, so in the afternoon she puts together some stuff in her Kelty backpack, rolls up her sleeping bag and a tarp, bungies them onto the frame, and throws her load in the back of the crummy with everyone else's. The other crew will use Juneen's Ford six-pack, which is practically a crummy in its own right.

The twenty-acre crew hop in and drive for about two hours to reach their job, and find it pancake-flat. As promised, there's a tarp over a snowbank with thousands of jelly-rolled trees, mostly baby lodgepole pines, waiting for them.

"Shall we do this one by the piece? Buy some cows and retire to our mini-ranchettes?" grins Burt.

Camp is made right out on the relatively flat clear-cut, with a small fire. Sleeping bags radiate from the fire, cowpoke fashion. Steffi thinks of the crackling-cold night under the frozen stars in Arizona. A lot has happened since then.

Not long before dawn, she's awakened by a cold nose. No, wait, it's somebody *else's* nose! right against hers. Mildly

disgusted, she wriggles her arm up out of the bag to shove the interloper away.

Hairy. Tiny hands grip her finger and the nose leaves hers to sniff her hand.

Okay, now she's *awake*.

It's a raccoon.

"Go. Git!"

The animal nibbles at the heel of her palm.

"No, seriously, bug out or I'm gonna bean ya." She digs out her flashlight and tries shining the creature away. It just grins in its bandit mask and sits up, waving its paws in the light like someone making shadow play.

"What's up, Stef?" asks Chuck sleepily.

"Fracking coon won't leave me alone. Gahh! Now it's in my hair!"

Chuck and one of the Magraders rise up and prod the raccoon off into the dawn with sticks.

"Wow," says Chuck. "Light enough to work. What say we hit it now, see if we can do the whole thing today?"

"With six people?" asks Burt, sitting up.

"Why not? On this ground you can do one to two hundred trees an hour, even with th' shade blocks."

"You can. I dunno about me," doubts Steffi.

"Aw, let's at least have a go. We can be back in camp tonight, all the comforts of home."

With a groan, Chuck's companions lift themselves into the chill air. The raccoon anxiously watches from a safe distance as the now alarmingly tall animals mill about, eat, drink stale coffee made the night before, wander off to the bushes one by one, then drag their dags and bags from the roof rack of the crummy and head over to the jellyrolls.

"Oh, these are a hundred to the roll!" someone says.

"Yeah, with pines you can do that."

Steffi loads herself with two rolls, a quart of water and a tin of sardines. She can use twigs as chopsticks to eat brunch, then bury the can underneath one of her trees. This should see her through to lunch time.

Step, step, step, step, swing, draw tree, poke it into the hole, tamp, shade block with a stick or stone, repeat.

The sun rises over a far ridge and begins shortening stump shadows all around her. Birds are singing. With her gloved right hand holding lightly onto the end of her hoe handle, Steffi reaches for a tree from the left pocket of her bag. Whoa, empty. She moves the right-pocket bundle, chilly to the touch and heavy, into her left pocket. Wow, a hundred trees already. She looks along the line; the guys are way ahead of her, planting like machines, grinning.

She can feel it in her bones. This is going to be her highest production day. As in, never again a day like this. It will be all downhill from here.

That's fine. Nobody lives forever.

STEFFI NEEDS a place to park Ritzy over the summer, and Dan knows just the spot.

"Downstream from here, about five miles, there's an abandoned quarry. It was licensed for gravel, but the rock is rotten -- weathers into sand too fast -- and they gave up on it; nobody goes there, not even the BLM, which owns it. Right on a bend in Greenwood Creek, next to the apple orchard. You can get in from either upstream or down, and there's even room to turn that thing around in there. Just drive right in over the baby alders in the driveway, and they'll spring back and it's like you were never there."

She tries it, and it's all good. Parking at the south end of the landing, at the end of the old dump-truck turn-around, she's got plenty of shade for hot weather. The prevailing wind draws smoke from her chimney up and over the ridge, so she's not likely to attract undue attention. Time and space to read *Three Pillars*, watch sunsets, and think.

But there's not enough groceries for the summer. Steffi hikes out, thumbs her way to Omega Farm, and pulls weeds with Dan for a bit. She's got a little money from the Idaho job; enough to expand her horizons a bit.

"Does anyone have a motorbike for sale around here? Not an Electro-Glide or anything like Little Butch has. I'm afraid I'd drop it just trying to go over a curb or something."

'Well up at White Star they have one, I think; something Japanese. Clunky. But we have a good mechanic here. Could maybe get you on the road cheap.'

Steffi checks this out and within a week she's the proud owner of a moderately unattractive orange-and-black Yamaha three-fifty with high pipes and a rusted sissy bar, complete with helmet, a greasy cloth bag of Volkswagen tools, and spare tubing for the gas line. It's been awhile since she's driven a bike, which was a Honda Ninety in Enterprise, Alabama, all of once, and the Yamaha looks like a lot of bike to her.

Dan trains her on it. Shifter, throttle, brake, lights, gauges. How to watch for traffic, potholes, dogs, and railroad tracks.

Licensing? Insurance? Hey, she's young and foolish.

Every two weeks Steffi puts on her jacket, gloves, and helmet and cranks up Little Bird to head for Eugene, eighty miles from the quarry. She has a five-gallon bucket strapped to the sissy bar, and that's where the potatoes, rice and canned goods will ride. The curves are tight along the river canyon, the highway is narrow and bumpy, and the traffic unforgiving. It's a good education.

One of these trips is made late in the evening. On the way back out of town she spots a drive-in theater with a movie running. When was the last time she saw a movie? So she pulls into a suburban side street with a view, parks between two cars, sets the bucket down beside the bike and leans back into the sissy bar with her feet up on the handlebars.

She can't make heads or tails of the flick. Not just because, for her, there's no sound track. It seems to be about a plump subteen who's in some kind of row with her family, and there's a priest who keeps waving a crucifix at her and she

throws up an awful lot. Pretty soon the kid's head is spinning on her shoulders. Ugh.

Whatever the world is up to, outside of Greenwood Creek and the Hoedags, Steffi's thinking she's not up for it. After awhile she puts the groceries back on the sissy bars and motors off into the night.

...

A walk along the creek in the morning convinces Steffi there are possibilities for supplementing the potatoes and rice. What are called "creeks" here would be serious rivers anywhere else, and the driftwood piled high in trees on the bends serves as a testimony to what can happen when the whole Pacific Ocean decides to dump itself in your lap.

Among the pools and riffles there are what look, to her, like dwarf lobsters, crawling every which way. Steffi is not much into shellfish, but she's thinking that where these are, there may be trout.

Back at the Ritz, she digs out an old and heavy baitcasting rig she'd pilfered from her dad, with which he had fished for many years for bass and bream. It's rigged for bream, very lightweight line, small hook, one split shot. She's not too sure of the antique lures in her kit that came with the rod and reel, and it hasn't rained in months, so she's not likely to find worms.

Oh, hey! The lobsters! But they have those big claws. Folks around here must know how to catch them, but Steffi has no one to ask at the moment, so she grabs the log tongs from underneath the Airtight and heads down to the creek.

There's one of the little dickenses right there. After snapping at him fruitlessly for two or three minutes,

staggering around on the smooth stones in the riffle, Steffi corners the little guy -- gal? -- both? -- by a willow root and picks him up. He spreads his claws and plays castanets, which throws Streffi for a moment and she goes over backwards into the water.

Cold.

Where Steffi grew up, water is warm at this time of the year. This stuff takes one's breath away. Might as well be in a flood in the Olympics.

The tongs are empty now, so Steffi stands up, water draining from her hair, shirt, and jeans, shivering. She looks for a sunny spot to stand in, pulls herself together, and repeats the hunt.

Got one! She dismantles it, draws a section of fresh crawdad onto the hook, flings the hook and split shot into the pool downstream from the riffle, and in seconds is playing a tiny trout over to the bank.

Gonna have protein all summer.

...

Fish and potatoes every morning will last until the rains come. But a little more money before fall would not be a bad thing to have; a cushion. In case Ritzy ends up needing another engine replacement, say.

Steffi places a call to Hoedag Central.

She catches someone in, which is lucky in August. "Yeah," the guy says, "not much goin' on right now. There *is* some precommercial thinning. Near Alderton, too, and they're short-handed. Not much money in it, they never pay good out your way. But that's what there is. Got a saw?"



Steffi shows up on the landing riding Little Bird, in her blue hard hat and caulks, with saw, gas, oil, lunch, and water in the sissy-bar bucket.

The crew leader, a tall, humorless but gentle man called, appropriately enough, Slim, shakes his head. "No scrench? No round file? No laundry soap bottles to hang yer liquids on yer belt? An' that McYellow there is worse than no saw; it will shake yuh to death. But yer a Hoedag already and I've heard nothin' bad about yuh; we'll see what we got in th' crummy."

Slim outfits Steffi and they walk, slide, and skid for half an hour through jungle into the bottom of the unit. Steffi falls head over heels twice, scattering tools and sandwiches in the brush. Slim shakes his head again.

Thinning is done from the bottom up. A tiny creek is squeezing through a thicket of salmonberry. At the bottom edge of the unit, which had been tree-planted a decade before, Slim trains Steffi as best he can. The work is more complicated than she'd thought.

"Work sidehill," Slim is saying. "Meet somebody, bump up fourteen feet, work back, repeat." He draws the diagram in the dirt at their feet, then stands up and points.

"See, right here is a good tree. S'Doug fir, eight foot tall, an' all 'round it is some ocean spray, alders, bracken. No need to cut bracken, or grasses 'n forbs, but if it's woody 'n within fourteen foot o' yer good tree, cut it off within six inches of th' ground. Take out smaller or poorly shaped Doug firs or hemlocks or cedar, and anything broadleaf -- alder, maple, 'shittim,' willow, cherry, viney maple, ocean spray,

thimbleberry, salmonberry. Y'cn leave these Oregon grapes alone. Sword ferns, huckleberries, they're okay. Yuh don't have a good fir, pick a hemlock or a cedar. Yuh don't have any conifer, skip ahead to yer next good tree. You get into old-growth alder an' there's any conifer in th' understory, I'll show yuh how t'ring th' alders."

Slim puts in his earplugs, lifts his gray and red saw by the wraparound handle, yanks once at the cord with his other gloved hand, and gives a demonstration. In seconds, things are falling toward the creek one after another, as he walks along.

Steffi kneels atop her saw housing, sets the choke, yanks about fifteen times, and eventually cranks up and slashes at her surroundings for a few minutes. There's a tap on her shoulder.

"Yer way too dull an' runnin' too rich. Siddown a minnit."

For what seems like hours, Slim files away at each tooth on Steffi's saw chain, then files at the rakers, which she hadn't even realized had a function, explaining as he goes.

"Shine each tooth evenly, an' always file to the outside of your cut. Y'wanna smooth bevel here an' a minimum of resin buildup. Use th' same number of strokes on each tooth or it will cut on a curve. All our wood here, 'cept for madrone, is soft, so take your rakers down like this t' throw a bigger chip. 'K? Now yer chain's too loose, yer gonna throw it. Yer scrench at this end will loosen these two half-inch nuts, then yer tighten th' screw here; not overtight. See that daylight when I pull on it? 'N now yer carburetor, take yer scrench an' take both of these screws back t' zero, then this one out one turn, 'n this one a turn an-a-half."

Steffi's head hurts. Might as well be studying calculus. But when she cranks the saw again, it starts right up. And she can't believe how fast the chain goes through the little alders. Saplings bounce off her hard hat, slide down her shoulders, and roll downhill behind her like the wake behind a boat. This would be fun if it weren't so hard.

The buzzing saw chain is out of her sight half the time and the saw bucks around among the smallwood as she imagines a bronco might buck. This is not at all like firewooding. *No wonder Slim talked so much about knowing where my legs are at all times.*

Steffi does not remember ever having worked at anything so exhausting. When her first tank of gas runs out, she falls over on her back in the slash, dizzy, her eyes full of salt. Her arms are covered with scratches even beneath the heavy drill of her hickory shirt. When she crosses her eyes, she can see blood drying at the end of her nose.

She drags out a red bandanna and wipes her face. A hummingbird appears from nowhere and hovers for a long moment not six inches above Steffi's eyes. Oh! It's checking out the bandanna.

There are saw noises everywhere but here; mostly upslope somewhere. She's falling behind; better gas up and go.

After her four tanks of gas have run out, it takes Steffi a long time, say about fifty years, to make it back to the landing. Other crew members have worked through the area she'd come in by and it's all changed. The jackstrawed slash easily defeats her efforts to gain altitude.

When she arrives at the landing, the others are having a heated discussion. Steffi feels hostility in the air. The men, all

but Slim, climb into their crummy as she starts unloading her gear into Little Bird's bucket.

Slim comes over.

"There's been a, uh, a crew meetin' an' th' guys are feelin' like you will cost us too much money. They're hopin' you'll wait for tree plantin' to start up again."

Steffi feels tears welling up behind her safety glasses. "It's -- well, I need money too. Maybe I could work at half rate till I get the hang of it?"

"I like it that you thought of that, but it wouldn't be legal really." He thinks a minute.

"Tell ya what. I'll bring it up to th' others that we'll put yuh on yer own subcontract, right across th'draw. Yuh do that piece, y'get paid for that piece. It probably won't make yuh minimum wage but it'd be something. I'll check on yuh once a day."

"Wow. Thanks, Slim."

"It's about fifteen acres, I'll ask the fazoos t' tell us exactly. You'll need to be done by th' first of October, an' if ya meet inspection, you'll make, after fifteen percent to Central, about six hundred dollars."

That seems like a lot to Steffi. She's almost grateful. But then Slim's talking again.

"But y'gotta dump that McYellow. No shocks, no chain brake, bad piston ring. So half of yer six, we'll get Central to front it to ya an ya go buy a Stihl."

"Steel?"

"Stihl. German saw. Model oh-thirty-one, sixteen inch bar."

So, for her summer's work, Steffi's going to make three hundred dollars, less saw, sawgas, oil, and tools. If she doesn't shorten a leg.

Oh, well. With any luck, she'll make it through to planting season a little stronger and wiser.

Maybe.

"WHERE TO now?" Steffi asks Burt over the phone.

"Down th' Umpqua an' head south to th' Bay. BLM. Nobody likes BLM, but it's what's open this year; too much snow at Circus elevations. We'll have two crews in camp, Face and Wildcats. Stop by Central and get a map."

Steffi is running late. She's got to hit Central before five, get her groceries, drive half the night, and find camp in the dark, maybe around midnight, in the mountains of the southern coast.

She turns to Dan. "Can I get a couple of y'all Omegas to help me get Little Bird into th' back of the Ritz?"

...

In Eugene, Steffi pulls into the gravel parking lot by the railroad tracks and climbs the steep stairs to Central. The Hoedags office is a set of dingy smoke-filled rooms above a food co-op, with church pews for benches and some three-legged tables and chairs. The Bidding Room is the heart of the company, with representatives from various crews arguing over cramped writing on an old blackboard

...

It's a long way down the mighty Umpqua at night. The droning of Ritzy's engine nearly knocks Steffi out, which she

would purely hate to have happen, as drowning, in spite of her best song, is not her preferred way to go down.

Shifting gears in sleepy Reedsport, she hangs left and follows the white line, around curves, past mysterious black lakes, and, briefly, along the dark Pacific.

Uh-oh, blue lights in the rear view.

"What's the matter, officer?"

"Interesting rig you have there, Miss. I hate to bother you, but there's a taillight out."

"Oh-h-h, thanks, I would have never known."

He's got his little book out, writing a ticket in the light from his headlamps, when his car radio comes to life. It's for him.

"Oops, gotta go. But you stop first place you can, get that light fixed."

"Yessir." Steffi mounts up, heads south again. A close one; on her present budget she's not sure she can get a light bulb for Ritzy, let alone sustain a ticket. All the money in her world is tied up in a motorcycle and a fancy chainsaw. Any more money is waiting somewhere in the darkness ahead.

Ah, here we are, a left, a left, a right onto dirt, ten miles, and a right.

She doesn't see a right. Ritzy is lugging a little; shift down. Still lugging, shift down. Shift down again. This is a really beat-up road; log trucks are clearly running a 'show' somewhere up ahead when there's daylight. Camp is on a dead-end road with no logging; she's missed her turn.

Steffi pulls onto a wide-out and climbs down from the cab. Oh, finally a little moonlight. Not that it helps much in the heavy cloud cover. A light rain softens her eyebrows as she looks down over the precipice.

Oh, that's gotta be camp. Kerosene glow in a small creek valley. She's gone up the mountain by mistake. Ah, well. Hop in; find the logging show, turn around on the landing. Steffi fires up the engine, pulls back into the road ...

... and the engine dies.

Right away she knows, and sets the emergency brake, cursing.

Gas! She's forgotten to fill up the truck and the spare cans in Eugene again. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Could drag out Little Bird and go get a can filled. But Little Bird is heavy and the road is steep. Could walk out with a can, borrow a gallon and come back. But it might be a ten mile round trip or more; the loggers are going to want this road in about five hours. She can't be sure of getting back in time, even if she can rouse somebody for a lift.

And loggers *hate* hippie house trucks, especially the ones with jade trees in those windows with the little yellow checkered curtains.

Hmm.

Steffi swings open the driver-side door and climbs down onto the wide running board. She reaches for the grab bar on the side of the cab and sticks one leg experimentally into the cab. Foot on brake.

Possible.

Steffi climbs down onto the gravel, crunches round to the back doors, lets herself in -- an athletic achievement in itself -- retrieves a flashlight, tapes it to the side of the steel girder supporting the house, and switches it on. Not much of a "head" lamp but she sees the road, sort of, and the drop-off, sort of, and the cut bank, sort of.

Sigh.

At one mile an hour, foot on brake, other foot on running board, eyes straining back along the cedar shakes of the house, Steffi backs down the mountain, steering round the curves, heart in mouth.

It's not until she makes it all the way down into the swamplands and finds the turnoff to camp that she remembers.

Gas-line tubing. She could have siphoned off Little Bird's gas tank and been on her merry way.

It's almost dawn as Ritzy pulls into a suitable campsite, right next to Little Butch's big black Harley.

Part of Steffi wants to go to the yurt, wake everybody up and tell them her amazing adventure.

Better not.

Aside from they need their sleep, they could all tell even more amazing adventures of their own.

That's the way of it in the Hoedags. Better she should just fire up the Airtight and see if they want some breakfast.

...

The "Blim" suspects are more difficult and distant than those Steffi's used to from the 'Circus' and seem to go out of their way to add to the unpleasantness of the local climate and dangerous terrain. Day after day in the glutinous rain, morale falls.

Chuck watches the dispirited crew thunking away at the soggy duff with their tools, seemingly unable to earn any other inspection rating than eighty-nine percent, no matter how many extra 'insurance' trees they put in. He watches the inspection plots closely and argues every tree. He worries

himself hoarse and is driven to his bed in the back of his pickup.

Burt takes over, but burns out within days. Juneen would give it a go, but the crew feeling is that an alpha male is the only crew rep the BLM will halfway respect.

Isaiah, a family man, is not in camp this month, so options appear limited.

Little Butch volunteers.

"You're, pardon us, not an alpha male," responds Amy.

"Ouch," grins Little Butch. "But I'm, y'know, devious. Might be good for something." He's twirling and polishing a strange collapsible star made of slim brass rods -- a craft he'd picked up somewhere.

Next day, he's standing on a stump in his underwear, with his camera in his hands. His dreadlocks are ruffling in the stiff morning breeze.

The suspects roll their eyes but they get on with their work of finding enough wrong with the quality of the crew's efforts to bring down the contract price ten percent.

One of them's digging a hole next to a tree, in preparation for tracing out the position of its roots with a pencil.

There's some annoying clicking going on.

He turns to find Little Butch right behind him with the big camera.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making a photo-doc. It's for the *American Geographic*."

"Wait, wait, you can't take pictures of me."

"Too bad, you'd look great in the article, just the kind of man we want representing the United States Government. But don't worry, I haven't shot you, just your hands and that pencil."

"Get out of here."

"Sorry, can't, I'm the crew rep, page two, second paragraph."

After a few hours of documentation by the half-naked madman, the suspects retreat to their white pickup and make frantic radio calls.

Higher-ups show up. They visit the site and talk with Little Butch.

A call is placed to *American Geographic*. Turns out, unbeknownst even to the crew, Little Butch is legit. He has some kind of deal with them, very recently negotiated.

Things loosen up a little bit.

⋮

Despite the improved relationship with the district, the work is still difficult. The biggest unit of the contract, a mere sixty-two acres, seems to go on forever. There's no access to part of it except down a vertical sandstone rock face with a little dribbling waterfall. Chuck, who's recovered, reconnoiters and recommends the whole section be planted in one day, by having volunteers climb in via the creek chimney, then bag up from tree sacks brought down from above. The idea is unanimously adopted.

Steffi is not a great climber but ends up on the delivery crew. She's wedged in by her knees, with the little waterfall pouring down the back of her rain jacket and soaking into her boots, reaching up for one proffered tree sack after another and easing them down to Murray, who is right beneath her.

There are four workers in the chimney. As Steffi releases the last sack into Murray's hands, she hears the dreaded warning cry from somewhere above: "*rock!*"

Steffi tilts back her head in an effort to see what, if anything, might be coming their way. Those above her crowd themselves back into the chimney, spraying runoff into the air.

The rock has been rolling, relatively slowly, down the ravine above and has pinballed itself into the chimney before anyone can try to stop it. Water is in Steffi's eyes, but the rock looks sufficient large to her to be a threat -- maybe even volleyball-sized. If it misses the two crewmembers above, it may hit her. If it misses her, it will certainly hit Murray, and by that time it will have acceleration to hit like a cannonball.

It's going to pass by her, *really* close.

Without any conscious thought, Steffi reaches up, palms the rock with both hands, collapses her elbows to her side, and shoves the missile outward somehow. It tumbles past Murray and crashes into piled slash fifty feet below him.

Everyone in the chimney has frozen, a tableau of stacked treeplanters. They're told later they looked a bit like a stunned totem pole.

...

That night, Steffi pulls off her shirt and tee and discovers a bruise from collarbone to collarbone, ending just above her breasts.

...

The "sixty-two" continues to bedevil the crew. Another section can only be approached -- dry-shod -- by means of a

debarked and green-slimed log thrown across a winter-swollen creek, some ten feet above the water. The loggers apparently used this route, as they have left a rusted cable strung from tree to tree, as a kind of hand rail for the log.

Steffi is not much into crossing logs, but everyone else seems unconcerned. They troop across, do a morning's work, troop back, eat lunch, bag up again, and troop across, disappearing into the heavy slash with aplomb. To cover for her trepidation, Steffi is the slowest at bagging up her trees, so that she can inch across the log alone. With the caulk boots, it would seem to be no big deal -- they provide excellent traction on slick wood, and on the slopes Steffi is, like the others, half monkey. But a ten-foot drop seems to put things in a different light for her.

After the day's done, she walks back to the bridge alone, puts on her caulks, and practices. Back and forth, back and forth, with and without holding on to the cable.

This isn't so bad. Maybe I'm getting over it.

She turns to go back and change shoes. The caulks strip out of the log, Steffi bounces once, and plops into the icy pool.

Okay, it's that bad.

...

The next day, the crew bags up, crosses the log, and goes to work. Steffi dallies with her bag-up and starts inching across yet again.

Something in the water catches her eye.

She's not really anxious to look down, but she tugs the cable toward her and leans out a bit, which stops the cable's wobble enough for her to feel secure, and investigates.

Fish.

Really big fish. Lots of them.

Steffi has not seen spawning salmon before. She's amazed, mystified and humbled by this display, and almost forgets to go to work.

Others have seen the fish too. Conversations all across the slopes are about size, numbers, colors, and the wonders of migration. By day's end, almost all the men have buck fever.

It's the end of the dreaded sixty-two and good riddance. The suspects have relented and it will pay one hundred percent. Face/Wildcat Crew feels like celebrating. They count their leftover trees into a tree sack, help the suspects load it into their truck, wave goodbye to them, stand around a bit in case the suspects forgot anything and come back, then the men, as one, slip out of their caulks, roll up their staged-off jeans, wade into the pool beneath the log bridge and stand around with dozens of giant fish milling around their feet.

"Whaddya think?" asks one.

"Hard to get hold of," says another.

"We oughta at least try," says another.

Murray leaps on a salmon, which splashes away upstream beyond the riffle.

Amy, standing on the bank with Steffi, cheers the fish on.

"Whose side are ya on?" asks Burt, who has just repeated Murray's performance.

"Well, y'know, those salmon have come a long way. Maybe we ought to not bug them."

Willard comes down the bank, trousers rolled, hoedag in hand. "That one was-was-was too fresh, M-Murray. Yours t-t-

too, Burt. Ya wanta, wanta get one with, with white s-s-spots, p-p-patches, all s-s-spawned out."

"You know so much, pick one and get 'im," says Murray.

Little Butch, also on the bank, snaps Murray's picture.

Willard watches the water and the thrashing men awhile, then suddenly leaps into the riffle as a white-shouldered salmon struggles by. He raises the dag. Just as he does so, Murray arrives, chasing behind the fish. There's an audible thump as the reversed blade meets Murray's skull. The dag comes down on the hapless salmon and Murray drops to his knees, hands on his head.

Blood can be seen running down the riffle toward the pool, and not all of it belongs to the fish. All the witnesses fall silent.

Murray, eyes closed, is the first to speak. "Did ya get 'im?"

Willard, who doesn't even know yet of Murray's mishap, bounds up the creek bank with a flopping salmon by the gills in one hand and his hoedag in the other. Either one is about as long. "C-Coho," he says, proudly.

Little Butch snaps its picture.

Amy has turned her head; she's looking down the road.

"Truck comin'."

Everyone springs into action. The remaining crew members in the creek seemingly levitate onto the roadside. Burt takes the fish from Willard and stuffs it, almost doubled, into Steffi's tree bag, which she's still wearing. He turns her to face toward the road. He and Chuck line up to her right; Willard and Amy do the same on her left.

The truck arrives, slows down, and stops. Sure enough, it's the Fish and Game.

Window rolls down. Gray beard juts out. "Hey, kids. Been tree planting, huh?"

"You bet," replies Burt.

The fish seems to come awake in Steffi's tree bag, and starts flapping frantically. Chuck has a coughing fit.

The Fish and Game's shotgun is turning over pages in a Tatum clipboard. "We're surveying the anadromous fish runs. Seen any fish in this creek?"

"Oh, y-yeah!" says Willard. "They're running!"

The fish lunges, throwing Steffi a little off balance. Amy bumps shoulders with her to keep her upright.

"You didn't by any chance see what kind they were?"

"Oh, th-they're cohos 'n s-s-steelheads, maybe about thirty of each in th' pool here. Some are, are already spawned out."

Flap-flap-flap. Chuck's coughing again. Little Butch takes the Fish and Game truck's picture.

"Gee, thanks! This is good to hear. Well, good luck with your job!"

"You bet; you too," waves Burt.

Fish and Game drives off.

There's a collective sigh of relief.

Murray, who is holding his scalp together with his tree hand, looks into Steffi's bag. The fish has finally agreed to expire.

"Salmon steaks tonight!" announces Murray.

"S'GONNA BE a long, hot summer," announces Dan.

Steffi's not really listening. Dan has procured a quart of fresh cream from Omega Farm's cow for Steffi's birthday, and she's trying to dispose of it in one sitting. There are no cows in the quarry, and she's nuts about cream.

Dan goes on. "Some of us are thinking about putting together a fire crew; make a little money for the Valley. You want in?"

Oh. Work! Money. Pay attention. "Umm, sure."

"Have you done any bidding?"

"A little. But that's all acreage and spacing; how do you bid fires?"

"We're going to talk to Timberlands tomorrow and see what they want. Play it by ear. Come along, hm?"

...

Next day, Steffi finds herself sandwiched on a pickup's seat between Dan and a long, lanky, soft-spoken fellow with John Lennon glasses and a nice Roman nose.

"Carlo," he offers his hand. "Star crew, same as Dan."

"But this job is not Hoedags," explains Dan. "We're looking for mostly summer work for us farmers, so it'll just be a small company and we'll just bid work that's close to home. Call it Greenwood Workers Co-op."

"Workers," muses Steffi.

"Lot of old Wobblies up in here," offers Carlo.

They roll through Alderton and take the third mill entrance on the left.

The meeting room is just like the one in the Ranger station. There are windows with blinds along one wall, gray-enameled steel filing cabinets along the opposite wall, and a blackboard on the end wall. A handful of paunchy men in white shirts, sleeves rolled up, amble in. Steffi wonders if she's seen this many paunches and hairy arms in once place, ever.

"What we have in mind," say the paunches, "is we make one call, you can supply eight to fourteen bodies within two hours. We'll train. Hourly rate per body, time and a half, double time. We'll try not to have any days longer than sixteen hours."

"Is this shovels and McLeods mostly?" asks Carlo, who has been on fires before. Steffi hears "M'Clouds." She has no idea what that is.

"Well, it's good if you have those, and Pulaskis and a couple of saws. But it's mostly hose work from pumper trucks, mopping up after unit burns."

"Sounds good," says Dan. "But why us all of a sudden?"

"Well, we usually use crews made up of loggers -- out-of-work choker setters an' chasers -- but they tend to run off to Alaska fishing or whatever, and we can't get reliable numbers on the ground when the chopper's ready to drip."

One of the paunches looks at Steffi a bit sourly.

Uh hunh, another one thinks a girl can't work.

She pipes up. "Can we recess a few minutes, go out the parking lot, come back to you with a pre-bid? Subject to approval by our crew."

"Uhh, sure. Be our guests in the next room if you like."
Coffee there, too," says another.

The Greenwooders step through the door. Ugh, Styrofoam.
And the coffee looks like it was brewed last week.

"Did I do that right?" asks Steffi. "I needed to look real to those guys."

"No, that was fine," says Dan. "Yes, we'll be able to interest people in anything we can get here."

Carlo takes a sip, makes a face, and puts his cup down.
"Hose work is pretty easy. We can bond the company with my place and recapitalize at, say twenty-five percent. So, if we want, like, eight dollars an hour, tell Timberlands twelve."

"Can we guarantee the bodies in the crummy?" asks Steffi.

Dan answers. "Yes. Greenwood is used to using phone trees. What about we keep the crummy at your place, Carlo, because you're way upstream. They call me, I call the next name on the chart, and the eighth or tenth person or however many they want, less one, calls you?"

"I can do that," Carlo nods.

"I don't have a phone," Steffi points out, suddenly alarmed.

"We can just assume you're going, Right? Seeing as you're not a farmer."

No, but I kinda wish I was. "Cool. We tell, 'em what, then, twelve? And about saws, they cost. Sawyers with their own saws a better rate? We could pay out twelve for saw time? And what about drive time?"

"Sure, you tell 'em." Dan smiles.

They file back in.

The paunches look at Carlo, then Dan.

"We believe our people will do it for twelve an hour per head, plus saws at sixteen, plus miles," says Steffi.

There's a moment of surprised silence. Then a subtle shift in expression, as Timberlands meets the future head-on.

"Deal," says the head paunch, cautiously extending a hairy arm. "Hope to hear from ya sometime tomorrow."

Steffi shakes on her first contract.



Training day, the thermometer decides to zip up to a hundred and five degrees.

Just to add a little, you know, realism. Those who, for example, aren't carrying enough drinking water learn a little bit about that.

There are eighteen trainees, a third of them from Omega Farm. Not everyone is experienced in woods work, but even those who aren't at least know which end of an axe is which, and all are willing to follow instructions. Unlike tree planting, at a fire you can't always wait to get a vote on what must be decided, so Carlo is elected crew leader from the start. He's working with the paunchy guy that leads the training. First lesson: when it's this hot out, protect yourself. Work slowly, drink a lot, and from time to time spray yourself with your hose.

Steffi learns the tools of her new trade. The drip torch is carried along and pours a kerosene-scented flame on dry brush, good for setting slash burns or backfires. The hazel hoe has a curved three-foot handle like the hoedag, only stouter, and a heavy hoe blade for gouging at duff and dirt. The Pulaski is a combined axe and hoe, especially useful around tree roots. The McLeod is a rake with a tall, wide blade, straight-edged on one side and toothed on the other,

good for raking through coals and duff. The one-and-a-half-inch hose runs from the truck to the brass wye, which is coupled to a couple of one-inch hoses, each ending in a brass nozzle.

She learns to bring Vibram-soled boots instead of caulks -- caulks transfer heat to the soles of one's feet. She'll get a wide-brim hard hat instead of the cap-style plastic one she's been using. She'll wear a bandanna in case the smoke turns and she needs an impromptu mask. There will be two water canteens and a canteen cover stuffed with lunch suspended from her web belt.

A small portion of the unit they're on has been lit off with drip torches for the training. After the flames die down, the crew spreads out with hoses, wyes and nozzles and learns to trace burning roots with the water pressure from their nozzles.

It's like playing with mud pies. Everyone loves it.

...

Ritzy is nestled under the firs at the south end of the quarry again. During fire season, Steffi keeps half an ear cocked, in the mornings, for the crummy. It's a used eighteen-passenger yellow Weyerhaeuser bus with an air brake, and the yelp it makes coming to a stop means a day's work somewhere. Steffi's saw, boots, helmet and canteens are already stuffed into the tool locker; all she has to do is grab lunch and run down in the pre-dawn light to the half-asleep crew. Sometimes Carlo, at the wheel, is half asleep too, his day having started an hour earlier, so Steffi takes the wheel,

releases the brake, and heads out, getting her directions from Dan as she goes.

Today, they're going to Reedsport, up the Umpqua, into the Smith River watershed.

Much of this area is covered with a uniform green blanket of young fir trees, having suffered a massive forest fire a couple of decades earlier. Steffi remembers a book by a local housewife, all about a family's adventures daffodil farming on the Umpqua; the author had witnessed the huge fire and her description of it topping the ridge and threatening her small town had impressed the young reader deeply.

The unit is a clear-cut in a rare patch of old growth. Across the creek in the drainage is the rest of the old growth, trees so big they run five or ten to the acre, with branches the size of most trees. In the darkness beneath that forest, Steffi can see mature big-leaf maples, dwarfed by the old-growth firs. The big-leaves are the undergrowth.

The helicopter is late, so everyone gets to lounge around. It's by the hour, a novelty to many Greenwooders after years of piece work, and they're reveling in it.

Steffi's brought with her a text on koans, so she pulls it out to read awhile in the shade.

Mervin, a farmer from Greenwood, settles nearby. For awhile, his mustache flutters in the breeze from his snores, but as the sun reaches his legs and starts to bake them, he sits up, rubs his eyes and looks over at Steffi.

"What's that?"

"A book of koans."

"You're a collector? My dad was all about stamps. Crazy."

"No, *koans*. Zen Buddhist stuff. The teachers used to say illogical things to fry their students' habits of thought and get them going in new directions."

"Oh. One hand!"

"Yes, that sort of thing."

"Well, that's crazy too. What one are ya on right now?"

"A monk gets permission to go live in the canyon. He's down there a couple of years, and then one of the cooks goes to see if he's okay."

"That's it?"

"No, it's long one. He asks the hermit how it's going, and the hermit says, 'because the ravine is deep, I have a long handle for my water dipper.'"

"That *is* deep, Stef." But Mervin is chuckling. His own area of interest is the restoration of Farmall Cubs.

The air throbs with the passage of helicopter blades.

Everyone drops whatever they're doing or not doing and drifts over to the edge of the landing.

There it is, looming over the young firs two ridges away, coming their way. Its paint job is orange and tan, vaguely like that of Little Bird. It heads for the other landing, half a mile away, and alights there, straddling a long silvery tank that's been offloaded from a flatbed.

"That's the drip torch," says a paunchy white hat nearby.

"Not kerosene and diesel, like a hand torch, though. It's Lum-i-gel."

"Lummy-what?" asks someone.

"Napalm, basically. With aluminum powder in it. Makes a nice, fast burn all across the unit. He's running so late, though, we might be here all night."

The Greenwood crew, having with them only lunch, furrow their brows at this.

"Oh, not to worry, we'll getcha sandwiches and soda for dinner an' bring 'em to ya if it comes to that."

Presently, the chopper seems satisfied with the disposition of its burden and it takes off, torch smoking. Like a massive hummingbird it darts this way and that, pausing from time to time, not to sip nectar but to release bright orange globules of flame that splatter on stumps and spall amidst the piled and dried detritus of last year's logging show.

Flames run together and leap, first unbelievably high, then unbelievably higher. A mature tree that, for whatever reason, had been left behind on a point of rock, sways in the winds created by the heat, then erupts like a Roman candle.

"*Cheeses,*" says a farmer.

There's not much else to say. The cloud of smoke and steam that forms, superheated from within, rises through the early afternoon into cooler air, where it spreads into the mushroom shape familiar to Steffi from sixteen-millimeter films, shown in her childhood's classrooms, concerning "her friend, the atom."

She remembers a poem she's read about Hiroshima -- a father tells his son about his mother, how happy she was in that morning's light, reaching for a blooming cherry branch...

...and you were never born.

"What?" asks Mervin.

"Said that out loud?"

"Uhh, yeah."

"It's complicated."

"Oh."

The crew is sent down to the unit's right-hand fire trail to prevent flames spreading into the woods there. Steffi grabs her favorite nozzle and a section of one-inch and runs down along the trail, hopping over logs left behind by the loggers or cleared by the trail crew. She stops and looks back as Mervin comes behind her, fifty feet away. He has a one-inch hose looped in rolls over his shoulder and is dragging the inch-and-a-half. He sets the layout, threading a wye onto the end of the inch-and-a-half, throwing down his one-inch, coupling Steffi's line to the wye and then his, and moving off to his left toward the fire.

They're waiting for water.

The thump of the helicopter's blades is returning to the unit. Surprised, the crew looks up. It's slowing down as it nears them, with the guttering torch clearly visible, swinging underneath.

Gee, that's awfully close. No, right overhead.

What's he *doing*?

Orange globules appear, falling directly toward Steffi!

She drops the nozzle and runs along a log right through the nearby flames toward a tall, smoldering root wad. Nothing, so far as she can tell, has hit her. Surely, with the aluminum powder in full combustion, made tacky by the jellied gasoline, she'd not only know, but it might be one of the last things she *would* know. Pausing in the shelter of the root wad, Steffi looks up -- okay, the chopper is not directly overhead. It's still spilling fire. The flaming goop is landing in a streak right up the hill, much like a line of machine gun bullets hitting water.

Mervin has taken shelter underneath a large log suspended across two stumps. The fiery Lum-i-gel actually hits the log right above him, setting the bark aflame.

Crew members have scattered all over the hill, cursing.

"What was *that* about?" asks Steffi.

Mervin scrambles away from his burning shelter, checking his clothing for burns as he goes. "I dunno, but I'm gonna go find out. When the water comes down, go over the layout for leaks."

"O-okay." Steffi's knees are beginning to shake. She can see the hose bulging already. She checks over the line, finds that none of it has burned in the drop, and begins pursuing hot spots in the slash.

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A long, hot and dry hour later, Mervin returns and picks up his nozzle.

Steffi wanders over. "Well?"

"I got there just as they were putting the torch on the trailer. I asked the pilot why he came back, he said he thought the edge wasn't burning hot enough and he'd hit it one more time."

"I take it they failed to tell him we were already down there."

"I guess. Anyway, I told him, and he said, and I quote, 'well, one hippie more or less, big deal.'"

WITH THE fall rains comes Steffi's third season in the woods. Ritzy's starter motor isn't feeling well, and Little Bird's forks were bent by a borrower, so Steffi hitches to camp. The contract camp's only about an hour away from the quarry, if she can find a ride that will take her right to camp (hah!) or at least to the end of the Forest Circus road (more likely). She packs up a change of clothes and some possibles and a copy of Suzuki, puts on her hard hat, grabs her dag and drapes her caulks, laced together, over the handle, and puts her thumb out by the margin of the highway.

Today it's not a long wait; the third vehicle to come by is a green Volkswagen bug, driven by a huge head of hair. Steffi's thinking Frank Zappa's twin, or second cousin at least.

"How ya doin', great day huh, how far ya gotta go, can't go too far outta my way, hey ya got any grub on ya?"

"Not really." She needs her gorp for the slick, tiring hillsides.

"Ahh, too bad, I'm from California, gonna be in Seattle by tomorrer, th' fuzz in San Jose's jus' too nosy, know-whadda-mean, look inna back seat, ain't that purdy, you tell me that's purdy now."

Steffi twists around to see.. The floor and the seat are covered with greenish-gray bricks, each wrapped in its own thin, shiny layer of clingy plastic. She has no idea what they are.

"Look at you, making innocent, yer a hippie, I'm a hippie, here, I gotta smoke somma that shit." He opens the dashtray, then swears. "No-o-o-o-o. I left my pipe inna rest stop, diz-*asss-tah*. Look, you gotta pipe, any chance, sistah?"

"What?"

"A pipe, for frackin' cryin' out loud, you gotta have a pipe!" Better humor him. "Well ... there is one on me, yeah."

"So hand it *over*, yuh gonna have th' experience uvvah lifetime!"

Steffi fishes out the little Dr. Grabow

"Cheeses, what's *that* innit?"

"Tobacco."

"Cheeses, yer one crazy chick. Where'n-ell yer frum, West Virginia?"

"Umm, Georgia."

"Well, that explains a *lot* right there. Clean th' dam thing out, clean it good, clean it good."

Steffi goes at it with her little Swiss Army, wondering if she should maybe just dive out the door on one of the turns.

Big Hair takes the pipe, knocks against the dashtray three times for good measure, then produces a tiny lump of green coal and drops it in the pipe. "Here. Light that, light that, light that up n' pass it ovah."

Steffi obliges, making an effort not to inhale.

"Cheeses gahd, girl, you -- are -- *wasteful*, gimme that." He inhales and holds, rounding a curve erratically.

Fortunately there doesn't seem to be much traffic; Sunday in the Coast Range.

"Cheeses gahd, now is that not the good shit, the better shit, the best shit you ever hit, so help you gahd?" he grins, passing the pipe back.

Steffi mimes lipping at the pipe, then hands it across. She rolls down the window a crack. "Here's my turn-off, sir."

"Hey, I got time, take ya where ya goin', sure."

"Oh, there's no need. My, uh, my ride will come for me."

"Nahhhhh, door to fa-riggin door *service* s'me."

The curves are getting tighter as the road rises into the mist-covered mountains. Steffi's host paws at a box full of tapes between the seats, picks one, and jams it into a boom box behind his seat. *Aqualung* fills the tiny car. Big Hair sings along, and he's not bad.

"Look," he says. "I'm gettin' *inspired*, Reach back there, gotta flute case, right on topa th' hash."

Steffi scrabbles around, doesn't locate it at first, turns around in the seat on her knees, fishes, finds it -- has fallen down behind her seat, next to the immense pile of green bricks.

"That's two *hundred* thousand Seattle dollars back there, that is, that is, that is," says Big Hair. "Put th' flute case in my lap, take th' wheel."

Big Hair snaps the flute together and starts playing. He's with Jethro Tull note for note, astonishingly good. Steffi watches the road and steers, stunned, tries to stay focused on the curves. In spite of her efforts there is a buzzing in her ears, like the night she ate the brownies. The road keeps speeding up or slowing down; she's not sure which. Or is Big Hair's foot beating time on the accelerator?

They're approaching the rear of an empty log truck, hauling its trailer piggyback up the valley. It's a straight stretch and the other lane is empty. Without missing a note, Big Hair tromps on the throttle, and Steffi, having no alternative, steers into the other lane.

The trucker is either going faster than Big Hair thought, or is irritated at the glimpse of hippie-car in his rear-view and has picked up speed. Either way, Steffi's stuck steering down the road in the left-hand lane with a curve coming, and Mad Flute is still not missing a note in the driver's seat, mashing the gas pedal to the floor.

A loaded log truck appears from around the corner., filling all twelve feet of the left lane. It's several seconds before the truck's driver believes what he seeing and sets the croaking Jake brake.

There's not going to be enough room. Both truckers are applying the brakes and the trucks are screaming at the vee-dubya with their air horns. Flute still going. Pedal still on floor. Steffi still steering.

Too bad. Would have liked to have lived a little longer.

At absolutely the last second, there's daylight and Steffi snatches the wheel over, missing two log trucks' front bumpers in the same instant. She glances back.

Both trucks, the loaded one and the empty, are rolling off the highway onto the shoulders and are tootling curses from their horns.

Mad Flute drops the silvery mouthpiece from his lips for a moment. "What's their problem? I thought we handled that pretty well."

Steffi is still watching the curve, bug-eyed. "Um."

Big Hair finishes the album just as Steffi's crew camp heaves into view. "See, gotcha here in record time, betcha got stories t'tell now, huh?"

Steffi, gathering her stuff, nods.

The Bug whips around and disappears.

Steffi drops her dag, boots, hat, and pack frame and settles onto the ground next to a stump, leaning back. The rain pelts the steel hat, a swarm of tiny bells. Drops run down her forehead and nose, dripping onto her hickory shirt. The rain on the hat sounds like -- like --

A Magruder ambles by, going from pickup camper to yurt with his wooden bowl in hand.

"Stef! How'd you get here -- drop from the sky?"

"Um."

...

Marie is sitting in the crummy next morning -- Steffi hasn't seen her since her first contract, two years ago. The only open seat is beside her. After a few moments of intense silence, Steffi remembers that intense silences were what Marie had been about, usually followed, at some point in the day, by an effort to monopolize someone's attention for an hour or so, monologuing. The crew'd had little clue what to do with her, but in the Hoedags one does not simply shed a crew member for low production and some instability.

The unit's a top-down job, laid out from ridge top to creek bank, in the shadow, in better weather, of an unused steel fire tower. It's a tough work site, filled with gnarly logging slash and transected by deep ravines populated by hideously thorny stuff known as devil's club. Steffi finds she has to concentrate to make headway across the bristling draw and stay with the line. She's sure she's going to need a lot of duct tape on her Uniroyals.

It's at this point that Marie appears before her, sitting on a stump and weeping.

"What's up?" Steffi hopes not too much; she's got half a bag of trees to plant out yet.

"I ... I need ..."

Oh, lord, no, here it comes. Steffi decides she's not up for it.

"Tell you what we *both* need, which is to get these trees planted." She sinks her dag into the black earth at the feet of the stump, yanks open the hole, drops the sliver of green into it, tamps impatiently with blade and heel, and moves on. She fails to look back.

Fifty trees later, she's hung up in yet more devil's club when Isaiah appears on a rock face above her.

"Seen Marie?"

"Umm, while ago, going into one of her funks on a stump."

"Well, she's not on the hill."

Oh, crap. "I, uh, shined her on; maybe it's my bad."

"I dunno, Stef, maybe we all shined her on. I'm gonna go up to the crummy and look for her; y'wanna rep to 'th fazoos for me?"

"N-no, I think I want to go up with you."

Willard pops out of the slash. "G-g-give me y-your trees, Stef, I'll NPF 'n hand 'em out t-t somebody."

Isaiah and Steffi climb out of the unit, looking behind stumps, logs and snags along the way. Weather is coming over the next ridge and the day is getting on when they reach the crummy and the government truck.

Isaiah looks in the crummy and Steffi look in the cab of the fazoomobile, then in the back, but no joy. They look along the service road a ways, but there's no sign of people tracks, just truck tracks.

Isaiah looks up at the fire tower. "Maybe I should see can I see somethin' from up there?"

"Is it even open? I thought they do all that with airplanes now."

"Well, there's the stairs anyway," he points. "Ain't gated."

They both go. Trudging up to the first couple of landings is not too bad, but it gets scarier for Steffi after each flight of steel stairs, which seem to her more air than steel. There is wind moaning in the framework and the clouds are closing in at ground level. The railing shudders under her hand. Two more landings. Their caulk boots scrabble on the stair treads and the steel mesh landings. It's like walking on ice.

There's a last landing. They stand there, looking up at the trap door beneath the lookout cabin -- sure enough, padlocked -- and it takes a moment for Steffi to turn around and see Marie's rain gear, pants, shirt, kerchief, and underthings all neatly folded, with her rubber boots, tree bag, and dag all lined up beside them in a row.

Steffi taps Isaiah's shoulder and points. They both look up at the padlock again, then run over to the railings and look down, north, west, south, and east.

Nope, no ... body.

And now here are the clouds and the two searchers are shivering cold and can't see squat. Steffi turns around and starts stuffing Marie's clothes into the tree bag.

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"She must have dropped all that stuff up there and then run off into the woods," says Jerry-down at the quick meeting on the landing.

"And it's gonna be cold tonight," adds a Magruder.

"We've hollered all around the unit but no answer," says Burt.

"My partner is on the radio right now to the search-and-rescue," says the inspector.

Willard holds his arm out toward the poor excuse for a sunset, curls his hand around and counts fingers. "Th-th-three hours, s-su-sunset."

"Search-and-rescue can only do so much at night, liable to not start till morning," says the government.

"We oughta start right now," observes Jerry-up.

"Do that," says the government. "We'll stay here in case she shows up, honk the horn three times."

Dags and bags into the crummy. Fresh water. What food they can find. Couple of flashlights for thirtteen people.

Everyone, increasingly under the direction of the barefoot-and-crazy but woods-wise Willard, spreads out along the ridge to the right of the unit and dives into the darkness under the firs. Steffi snaps off a hazel shoot for a walking stick. Here she is headfng into slash again, and it's already been a nine hour day.

In deep woods, as on a clear-cut, what you want to do is climb up on the nearest log and walk along it in your caulks, which is what they're made for. The little spikes give a sense of safety and freedom, and pretty soon you're in competition with the most agile monkeys.

But in a search, you're keeping Jerry-down in sight on your left and Juneen in sight on your right. So you can't really take advantage of logs, meaning you're up to your waist in tiring stuff and continually off balance.

Hence the stick.

It's getting dark when the sweep hits the bottom of the valley. There's a light on beyond a pasture across the creek.

Short discussion. Up the gnarly mountain with thick rain clouds and a new moon? Or go say hi to the light?

...

Farmer opens his door and finds himself asking in a troop of tree planters, pants rolled up and boots in hand. Offers tea.

"Where are you from?" asks Steffi.

"Everybody wants to know," replies the farmer. "It's the 'accent.' If you think about it, I'm the only one here with no accent. I'm from London."

"London, England?"

"That's the second thing everyone says. What other London would it be?"

"Umm, you have a point."

"And you are from?"

"Georgia."

"Oh, right around the corner from Ukraine, then."

"Yes, sir. Could we, umm, make a phone call?"

...

On the second day of the search, Willard decides the twelve tree planters, fifteen federals, and twenty-six Search and Rescue citizens are slowing him down, and pads off on a hunch. He hoots a few times, Marie hoots in reply, and the next thing Steffi knows, she's the ambulance driver, hauling a slowly thawing blanket-wrapped Marie to the Johnson unit.

She tells Marie she's sorry, but she's not sure if Marie is listening.

AFTER THE "runaway" contract, Steffi takes a little time off to get Ritzy and Little Bird up and running. She's not a great mechanic, but with the aid of tools from the crummy and manuals from Eugene Public Library, she makes a little headway on the starter motor. Ritzy is parked at Central, by the tracks. This doesn't seem to disturb anyone, maybe because it's close to the city jail, which is next door to Central, and folks just don't hang around outside those sad, overly illuminated walls.

By day, Steffi tinkers with the starter motor under the skylight in Ritzy's "living" room; by night she reads in the sleeping bag, gloves on: it's a cold winter and the police are okay until you start building fires in your stove. For a reading lamp, she has the jail's sodium vapor lamps.

Once Ritzy's got a new starter motor throw-out spring in place and the motor re-installed and tested, Steffi turns to Little Bird's problems. A new headlamp is easy; the forks less so. She learns disassembly, puzzles over the forks awhile, then grabs them and a hydraulic jack and heads for the smallest gap she can find between two buildings.

It's late when she gets back to the Ritz. Little Bird's gonna be okay, but assembly should wait until morning. Or maybe even later; Face crew and the Wildcats are glomming in Six Rivers and she's running a week behind. She'll drive straight there tomorrow.

Packs herself into the sleeping bag in the "bedroom" above the tall blue truck cab.

Close above her head is the ceiling; cedar one-by-fours. It's a little like sleeping in a tent. She reaches up to touch the ceiling.

...

The road she's remembering, in her tenting days, came down from the hot Georgia Piedmont into the flats and curved along the lake shore to a small boathouse. This building was just big enough to hold a hefty retired gentleman and a cash box; outside stood a soft drink machine, a pay phone, and a mercury-vapor lamp.

Many years' accumulation of white moths lay in a heap on the red earth beneath the lamp.

Alongside the building, at water's edge, stood a long-legged shed, under which lay about fifteen wooden "jon" boats, green with yellow numbers, the objects of the gentleman's care. A sign on the shed read:

DAY USE ONLY. FISHING ONLY.
\$2 DAY.

Stephanie pulled up beside the heap of dead moths. The old gentleman, of impressive girth and gruff appearance, seemed to intimidate newcomers but was kind to his regulars. He huffed up from his chair, took one and a half steps, and leaned in the doorway.

Stephanie leaned out the window of her dad's station wagon. "Hey, Mr. Johnson. How have you been, sir?"

"Oh, hey, Little Bit. Ye've growed up! Where's your old

man? He arright?"

"Yessir, he's well. I'm here on my lonesome, sir." Steffi didn't want to dwell on her newness in this adult world, but the gent sensed both her reticence and her pride: a first-timer away from the parental eye. An occasion to be handled with care.

"You here f'r'a boat?"

"Yessir, and may I ask, I'd like to take Number Eleven, here, over to the point, camp out there for a few days?"

He looked across the water. "Y'dad knows you're here, right?"

"Yessir, and here's our phone number, sir."

"Okay, child, you c'n do that. Things are slow, that's a fact. Y'kin leave y'car here. There's this fire ring over there, use that, n'a good flat spot, but don't wander off. Bad swamp back there. Check in w' me inna mornings."

"Yessir."

"Six bucks."

"Yessir."

"Here's yer paddles."

"Yessir, thank you, sir."

Number Eleven was a high-sided three-seater, sixteen feet long, square on each end, with a chunk of cinder block for an anchor. It was not much favored by the fishermen, because it tended to catch too much wind; but Stephanie liked it for that; she could get onto the lee end of the lake and sail downwind, putting one paddle in the water behind her to steer by.

She rowed over to the point, on the east end of the lake, good for camping because it was to windward and would not have a lot of mosquitoes, and good for her

purpose because there was no road access.

She could put up the tent, stretch out, nap, eat, read, go off and paddle around, eat some more, sleep, build a fire, stare into the fire, hum, chase snakes. Read, sleep. Thoroughly explore the forbidden swamp. Alone.

Her own schedule. For, hmm, only the second time in her life. And this time with permission. She lay in the sun, a turtle on a Number Eleven log, soaking up the future.

Come the last night, she put her kerosene lantern on the landing, so as to find her way home, and rowed out to the middle of the lake under a stunningly red sky. Blankets, dinner. Prepared to stay as long as the stars wanted company. Dropped anchor in thirty-three feet of dark green water.

Stephanie ate her beans, read till it was dark, which was quite late out away from the trees, looked about, made her bed in the bottom of Number Eleven, put her feet up on the seat, watched stars and things come out.

Vega overhead. Jupiter to the southeast. Bats flying low over the water, a moment of wings thrumming by in search of whatever moths had been missed by the mercury vapor lamp.

Along about two in the morning, she came to. Felt distinctly Not Alone. She lay still, wondering if maybe a cottonmouth had got in with her, but those have a distinctive smell, a bit like watermelon. And rattlesnakes waft a bit of cucumber. There was a smell, all right, but it was like a wet rug.

Mammal, then.

Stephanie eased up in the dark and peered over the gunnel.

A beaver, looking for all the world as long as the boat, lay on the still surface, eyes closed. Shiny in the starlight. Dead? She reached out a finger. Poked the wet fur.

Water geysered up and descended on Number Eleven, the blankets, and Stephanie, as the startled beaver slapped tail and sounded. She screamed. Maybe twice, for good measure. Her heart raced for a good while, and she was fairly cold from the drenching by the time she got round to raising the anchor.

Could the beaver have been sleeping out there, hundreds of yards from the shore? Never heard of a beaver doing that. Then again, the beaver had never heard of a girl doing that, either. They had both had a pretty rough moment there. She set to with the paddle.

In the morning, she packed up, paddled around for three more hours, then pulled into the boathouse. Mr. Johnson took possession of Number Eleven. "So, d'ja catch anything?"

With her Baptist upbringing Stephanie felt compelled not to lie outright. "There ... there *was* a really big one, but it got away."

...

Steffi must have dozed off, remembering the lake. It's late night or pre-dawn, she's not sure. She's suddenly uneasy. Did she remember to lock the door?

And what woke her up?

She crunches up on her elbows and looks in the direction of the back doors. They're wide open, and there's a man in silhouette, with the lid of one of the lockers open, rummaging in the interior. Not a good thing to have happening; that's the locker with, among other things, an axe

and a machete in it. She'd better act fast.

Shrugging her shoulders and arms out of the sleeping bag, she reaches under her pillow for her .38. Taking the grips in both hands, with her trigger finger indexed along the frame, she aims it at the shadow. "Get out of there."

The man jumps and the lid bangs shut. He turns and steps toward Steffi.

"Heh," he says. "You wouldn't."

Smokes too much.

She locks back the hammer with her left thumb and puts her finger on the trigger. "I do flinch. But I don't miss the ten ring by much."

Apparently he's thinking it over. After a long moment, the guy shrugs and turns away, his rumpled trench coat rustling. He eases himself down to the ground through the open doors, and saunters away.

Steffi's shaking now, badly, but she's got things to do. She eases the hammer down, puts her beloved Model Ten in its holster, gets up, locks the doors, dresses, buckles on her gun belt, unlocks the doors, climbs down, locks the doors again from the outside, runs round to the cab, fires up Ritzy, and drives to another part of town. There she parks, runs back to the 'house,' secures everything for a bumpier drive, runs back to the cab, then heads for the hills.

Not until she reaches open country does she start crying.

"I DUNNO, Stef, might wanta sit this one out," Amy is saying. "They sprayed it heavy with 2,4-D."

"What's that?" asks Steffi.

Amy does a double take. "Umm, you are somewhat wise in the ways of the woods but naive as to the ways of the wood products industry."

Chuck beckons to Steffi. She and Amy follow him to the edge of the landing. He points at the nearest alder trees outside the burn area, which are dying, but don't look scorched. "See the tips of these twigs, they go all curly like a pig's tail."

It *does* look a little odd. "Mmm, yeah. What's up with that?"

"2,4-D kind of mimics growth hormones. It's making the cells that divide the most -- the ones in the growing tips of the branches -- expand erratically, shoving the twig around on its own axis in a spiral."

He points at the trunks. "Soon these trees will die, turn punky, shatter and collapse, because most of their cambium cell walls will have burst. We're hearing from the Farmworkers Union in California that this stuff affects people, too."

"So I'm, like, *not* going down there," concludes Amy, with a palm upturned. "Might wanna have a baby some day."

Juneen walks over. "Me neither. Last time I worked in this stuff, my period went two weeks off."

"Well, nobody's going to make you," says Chuck, taking off

his hard hat and raking his hair with a grubby hand. "But we *do* have a contract, and if only the guys go, we're one short today and the fazoos will call it off."

Steffi's funds have been depleted by her down time and repair work; she's anxious not to just haunt camp, which is particularly muddy and miserable this week.

"I'll go."

Amy kind of looks daggers at her, but doesn't comment.

It's a strange place to work. The rangers claim the chemicals were all vaporized in the unit burn, but the air smells faintly diesel-ish and Steffi keeps trying to not breathe. She stops and dampens a bandanna and ties it round her face, as she's been known to do on fires at Timberland, but she still feels light-headed. She wonders if it's a placebo effect.

Too, there's nothing to grab on to. All the slash that survived the burn is so brittle she can't haul herself around the steep hillside by it as she's used to doing. Steffi can see other treeplanters having the same trouble. A Magruder loses his balance, grabs a branch to stop his fall; it disintegrates and over he goes. A few moments later, Lon repeats the performance. As he tumbles into a draw, Little Butch snaps his picture, while barely keeping his own footing.

Steffi finds a puddle and spots a thin sheen on the water. She looks closely. The sheen can be one of two things -- broken-up fractals of color, almost crystalline, which would be bacteria, or spirals and curves of color, which would be oil. It's definitely spirals and curves.

"Hey, inspector, what's with the oily puddles?"

The white hat, leaning on his shovel on a stump, grins. "S'just bacteria."

S'just bacteria, hippie girl. Suck it up and dig.

⋮

In Steffi's Technicolor dreams that night, a young man stands by her bed. He looks a lot like her, except he has a black beard.

"How's it going, son?" she asks him.

"Not too good. I'm 'developmentally delayed.'"

"What's that?"

He goes over, taps a dark glass window in a cinder-block wall. "Ask the guy with the notepad; he's in here listening to us."

She wakes up slathered in a cold sweat.

⋮

While she's lying there, staring at what's left of the dream, she notices the ceiling close above her head has taken on a rosy glow. There's noise, too: pops and snaps like someone dancing on that fragile slash, or like a really big bonfire.

The glow flickers. Okay, bonfire. She scrabbles over to the edge of the loft, looks down through the window. Yoder runs past it with a five-gallon bucket. He's glowing too.

There's shouting.

Fire! In camp. She doesn't believe it.

Chuck throws open her back doors. "*Fire!*"

She believes it.

In her finest long johns, Steffi adds Little Bird's white bucket to the brigade. What's burning is a small travel trailer. Flames are coming out all the windows and, before long, as

camp is not near running water, the roof as well.

The main worry is the propane tanks, which are mounted on the trailer's tongue. Their valves have been cranked shut by a gloved hand, but where they are it's already too hot to try and dismount them.

All the extinguishers have been emptied. Burt has been pumping water from the camp's fifty-five gallon barrel, but it's taking awhile to fill each bucket. Several puddles in the beat-up gravel road have already been bailed onto the flames, mud and all.

They're out of things they can try, and backing away from the mess. Steffi turns around and finds Yoder gaping at the rapidly diminishing trailer.

"Sometimes ya gotta punt," Chuck says to them.

"Whose is that anyway?" asks Steffi. "I haven't seen it before."

"Belonged to the Magruders," says Yoder. "But the new guy rented it from them. 'Don't let him use the propane heater, they said.'"

"New guy?"

Yoder points out a young man standing not too far away. Nobody's standing with him. He's medium height, just a little portly (*tree planting will take that off if he sticks with it*, she thinks), black curly hair, a thin mustache. Steffi's thinking he doesn't look contrite enough about the trailer. Short a few?

Chuck calls him over. "Dale; Yoder, Stef."

Dale offers his hand. Sweaty palm; maybe he *is* contrite.

Chuck catches Steffi's eye. "Seeing as we don't have the yurt on this job, Stef, y'think y'could put Dale up for awhile?"

She's not r-e-e-e-al into it, but nods.

Dale has saved his backpack full of to-be-laundered but

not much else. By the fading firelight, Steffi leads him through the stinking pall of smoke to the housetruck's stoop. Huh, Ritz *Hotel* after all.

"You can have the blanket; anywhere down here. I'm up there."

"Up there looks comfy," he says hopefully.

"You can have the blanket; anywhere down here. I'm up there."

"O-o-kay, I gotcha."

"Night."

"Sure, 'night." He settles on the locker across from the Airtight and fishes in his breast pocket.

"Oh, and there are house rules. No smoking indoors."

Dale stops fishing. She half expects some grumbling but there's none forthcoming.

Home sweet sleeping bag. After Steffi closes her eyes, Dale gets chatty.

"Anybody rents ya a trailer, they oughta at least fix the heater first, y'd think."

Steffi's not sure she has anything to say to this.

"Where ya from?"

Where *is* she from? Steffi does have an Oregon driver's license; for three years now. It bears the address of an apartment where she crashed awhile; she's not sure she even remembers whose it was.

"Greenwood."

"No kiddin'? But I mean, before that."

"Oh. Georgia."

"Oh, wow. Me, I'm a native."

He says it in lowercase, and Steffi understands him. She's heard people use the term a lot. It means born in Oregon.

"So, Eugene?"

"Naah, Klamath Falls I think."

"You ... think?"

"I'm adopted."

"Um. Sleep now?"

"Oh, uh, sure. Sorry, I talk a lot."

Well, at least he recognizes it.

...

In the early going, Steffi finds Dale a less than ideal roommate, and frequently has to re-establish boundaries and ownership, but, she reasons, there's an extra body in the crummy at a time when two crews are having trouble making up a day's one-crew roster. Dale gets up, sort of ready and sort of willing, day after day. That, even his hostess has to acknowledge, counts for a lot.

Some people take to tree planting naturally; some do not. The crew watches Dale's lessons and, discreetly, shake their heads. He has trouble finding the line or getting his trees "right-side-up" as the old saw goes. He blurts out things to the suspects they shouldn't hear, and his contributions at crew meetings are less than edifying.

But he's a good cook. That, his fellow crew members admit, counts for a lot.

On the fourth night, Dale fixes dinner for the landlady. She has to admit she's impressed. The crew authorizes him to make a town run with the "sixpack" to buy supplies, and soon he has everyone looking forward to supper every night.

The work is slow, many of the units are a long crummy ride from camp, and the suppers are often prepared by lamplight.

Comes a day, the crew is so tired no one wants to even try to leave the crummy.

They all sit there, some still in wet caulks. Dale rolls a big one, lights it, passes it around. Steffi, as usual, waves it off with thanks. She thinks maybe she'd like a little air. With an effort she heaves herself up, staggers to the crummy door, cranks it open, and steps down to the wet sun-burnished grass. *Pretty*. Takes three steps toward Ritzy, and sinks down to rest against a stump.

The sky has cleared at last, and there's a pre-sunset sky-show in progress: shades of rose, pink, mauve. Other planters drag themselves out, discover the cloud show, and settle into an ever-growing heap around the stump. Dale is the last out, carrying what's left of the damp roach gripped in a long pair of tweezers. He's watching his own cloud show, by the look of him, and he drifts off to Ritzy and falls into his own bed, a pallet of foam rubber and blankets he's acquired since Fire Night. Steffi can see his boots sticking out of his nest, by the open back door. Looks like he is asleep already.

Some of those around her are napping also. Steffi just watches the sky. The closer evening comes, the better the show, apparently.

She's admiring purple and crimson streaks, in layers above the nearby ridge tops, when she spots Dale coming down Ritzy's steps with his boots, hard hat, and lunch box. These he thumps down with a flourish on a step. Bodies stir all around Steffi.

"So, y'all want pancakes for breakfast?" Dale folds his arms and surveys the crew, beaming good nature.

Eyes meet eyes round the circle. "Oh, uh, yeah, Dale, we want pancakes, you betcha" the crew choruses. "You betcha."

"Comin' right up." Dale marches back into the Ritz; presently smoke issues from the chimney, and soon the heavenly smell of buttermilk pancakes draws the full attention of everyone present.

It's a good dinner, served outdoors. No one goes lacking for butter or syrup, and there's enough jam for the jam fanciers. Dale pops in to the kitchen to fulfill a last request, then goes over to his boots, hard hat and lunch box, and heads over to the crummy.

Halfway there, it dawns on him that it's getting darker, not lighter. Slowly he turns and looks at the sky. A star has come out. His gaze drops to the onlookers, all still sitting around the stump with their plates on their laps and their forks poised in the air.

"It's not morning, *is it?*" he asks.

Everyone cracks up. The Magruders, who have been a bit formal with Dale up to this point, are laughing the hardest. Both of them stretch themselves out on the ground and pound it with their fists, wheezing themselves breathless.

It takes him a few moments, but Dale pulls himself together and cracks a lopsided grin.

"Well, okay, ya hadda good dinner, anyhow."

AFTER SIX Rivers, weather moderates across the Northwest and Steffi finds herself motoring up the Columbia again in her cedar-shake fashion statement, thankfully alone. Her boarder had not turned out as badly as she'd anticipated; in fact, she'd gained weight. But he had waved goodbye to everyone at the end of the job, cheerily opining he'd find happier work in restaurants.

Steffi's better at gauging distances this time, and doesn't run out of gas. The contract is in a different district, but based on the same town as last year, so she feels very much at home as she pulls up to the hotel in Pierce, Idaho. Some of the crew's other personal rigs are already on hand, and she finds their owners in the bar, with their feet up on the brass rail.

"Hey hey hey, it's Stef!" Lon salutes her with his glass. Little Butch raises his camera to record the moment, but the bartender points to the camera and wags his finger. No, no.

Steffi is asked what she'll have, and she's feeling a little adventurous. "Maybe a shot glass of the guy in the fur coat?" She points to a bottle of Canadian on the shelf.

Moving to a booth, Steffi nurses the little drink along for almost half an hour, trying to ration herself. It's not working. Someone has re-filled her glass when she wasn't looking; someone else has chatted her up and tossed back a few, leading her to sip along like an audience trying to sing along with Mitch. The room is starting to do things -- things she

remembers with unease from Brownie Night.

"Hey, Stef -- shoot some pool?" asks Lon.

"Umm, not sure I know how." As a small child, in small town Georgia, she and her friends had fooled around with enormous sticks and enormous porcelain balls on an enormous green table in the next door neighbor's basement. That would hardly count.

"Nothin' to it, here's yer cue." She's handed a much smaller stick than she remembers. The voice goes on. It's a local guy, and he sounds amused. "This game is eight-ball; you get th' odd ones and I'll shoot for th' even ones."

Steffi is given a quick tutorial in how to approach the cue ball; many of the ideas presented are familiar from her softball days -- and from reading *Zen and the Art of Archery*.

"Where do I start?"

"Well, th' cue ball is over here and th' nine's over there, a pretty easy shot. So I'd 'call' it -- say 'nine ball in th' side pocket' so's we can all hear it, then shoot. I;d try t' hit it right here" -- points with his cue -- "Otherwise th'cue will follow it into th' pocket an' y'l ose y' turn. See, if y' drop th' ball y' called, y' get to shoot at another of y' balls. But don't drop mine, that'll lose y' a turn too. Ready?"

Steffi is feeling slightly ill. "Mm. Hm. N-nine ball, side. Side pocket?"

"Yep, exactly right. Now shoot."

She does. The nine goes in and the cue ball skitters away. She's as surprised as the guys that she has another shot.

She calls another ball and sinks it. Then another. A shy person with, normally, performance anxiety, Steffi should have scratched the first shot. Instead, she runs the whole table and then drops the eight ball. She turns to the

astonished local guy. "That's it?" she asks.

Local guy turns on Lon. "You people are havin' us on! She's a shark!"

No, Steffi thinks, as the room tilts. *The Sharks are another crew.*

Lon shakes his head. "Don't think so. Gotta be a fluke. Known her for years, never seen her shoot pool."

Steffi nods vigorously. "It was, was, the guy in the fur coat. His fault." She's amazed at how slurred her voice is.

"An' anyway," says Lon, "It's not like we had money on it."

Murray, at the bar, steps down from the rail and addresses the room, weaving. "We're th' Hoedags. We're. A. Legend. In. Our. Own. Time." He gestures wildly and bows from the waist.

"In our own minds, he means." smiles Little Butch to a knot of Local Guys, who are bunching up and looking a little gruff.

"We can take on ... " begins Murray, who is trying to make a fist.

Burt, who is late to the party but has heard enough to gauge the situation, intervenes. "Let's go, Murray. You too, Stef."

They're bundled out to the street side by side, and tumble to their knees on a remnant of winter -- dirty, cold, white stuff piled up by snowplows.

Murray loses his dinner. At the sound, Steffi feels green all over. She loses her dinner, too.

"Oh. Man," offers Murray to her companionably. "Don't you just *hate* it when this happens?"

Well, now that she knows a little bit more about it ... yeah.



The contract is unlike any other Steffi's seen. The area burned over in a cataclysmic forest fire in 1910, and so few trees survived within the fire's boundaries that forest regeneration simply hadn't occurred. Instead, ninety thousand acres of deep brush grew up, creating less than ideal conditions for any conifer seeds that *might* sprout.

The rangers have concocted a novel approach to the problem. With D-9 Cats bearing twelve-foot blades, they've terraced miles of hillside. The treeplanters' job will be to walk along in teams of two, inserting plugs -- seedlings sprouted in plastic tubes, from which each tree, potting soil and all, will be drawn just before planting -- in the berms of the meandering roads. Actual "units" consist of no more than a couple of blue pin flags marking the terminus of such walks.

Yoder and Steffi pair off. Except for the weight of the plugs, which treeplanters dislike, it's an unusually easy job, and Yoder wants to talk philosophy.

He questions Steffi on Buddhism and liberal Quakerism, both of which she's marginally involved in, and expands his inquiry to areas she knows less about: Native American belief in particular and shamanism generally -- and what does she think about the Greek philosophers -- and how do they compare with Thomas Aquinas?

Steffi is not as well read as Yoder thinks, but she's flattered he wants a woman's opinion, and when the talk wanders into areas she knows less about than she should, she makes up stuff.

"See, Plato was from kind of a poor family, and so he wanted everything to be all connected so it would belong to

folks like him and not just to the rich; Aristotle on the other hand was from money and so he wanted everything to be just be itself and itself alone, so folks like him could lay claim to it and the Platonists would just be left out in the cold."

"No kiddin'?" says Yoder, highly interested, and he pops a tiny grand fir from its container and into the hole he's opened. He thinks about the discrete reality of the tree and how it nevertheless may become part of a mysterious entity called "the forest." A National Forest, no less. Woo, deep stuff.

The inspector, an affable young man, ambles around the curve behind them and taps a rock with his shovel to get their attention. "Do you two know you're planting about a quarter of a mile out of the unit?"

"Oh! Sorry, Bill, we'll plant right back to it."

Bill looks a little pained at their insouciance but plays along, setting out pin flags at their turnaround point.

...

They're about halfway back to the crummy when an apparition appears to them. The brush just ahead of them rattles and wags, and from it emerges a pudgy, sweating man weighed down with an enormous panoply of outfitter's paraphernalia -- orange vest and hat, binoculars, rangefinder, sheathed Bowie knife, and a big scoped rifle that looks like it has never been fired. Steffi half expects price tags to still be hanging off all the items. And how has he kept those boots so *clean*?

"Where *am* I?" asks the apparition.

"About two miles from the Forest Circus road," they tell

him.

"Oh. Well ... seen any elk?"

Nope. Not a one.

...

When the job's over, everyone melts away to work on other contracts. Yoder proposes that he and Steffi detour to do vision quests -- he on his mountaintop, she on hers. "There's nothing doing for at least a week. So we could go over into the Seven Sisters, do our thing, then caravan to Wyoming in time for the contract opener."

Steffi's a bit too much of a loner to care for that much coordination, but, hey, she gets her own mountaintop.

So, like, they do that.

It so happens Steffi has thought of doing this before. She's sewn some 'sleigh' bells onto two leather strips with trailing thongs, suitable for tying around her ankles for dancing in what she thinks is might be an appropriate cultural appropriation. These she packs up with her sleeping bag (ain't gonna sleep naked, magic circle or no magic circle) in a rucksack.

Steffi plans to bring no food. Ritzy is out of drinking water -- one of Steffi's many oversights -- and she's feeling too lazy to get down into the canyon across the road to stock up. She's got her cup and canteen, though, and is good at finding clean water -- what can go wrong? Leaving Ritzy locked down in the trailhead parking lot, she makes for the nearest mountain top.

It's a cold-ish sort of day, after all, and the clouds are looking snow-ish. Nevertheless, a sure thing about mountain climbing, even on a graded trail, is that it makes you thirsty.

And it's slowly dawning on Steffi as she sweats her way round the switchbacks, that her Sierra Club cup is not, by itself, going to find her something to drink. She'd thought she would be crossing draws, but the trail is that kind of steeply ascending thing built in the days of pack mules -- it's avoiding the available draws entirely.

Three hours into her hike, she's not having fun any more. Just as she thinks she'd better abandon the trip and try to get out of there barely alive, she rounds a bend and here's a sight to gladden any dessicated throat -- at trailside, by a cliff, there's a fifty-five gallon drum full of water, with moss growing on its rim, into which a steady trickle of the life-giving elixer drips, globule by shining globule, from a pipe driven into the hillside.

For mules, no doubt. Steffi feels like braying in celebration. She fills the canteen, offering a prayer of thanksgiving for old-timers.

This particular mountain tops out with two knobs at about six thousand feet elevation. The trail is heading for one peak, so Steffi picks the other as being private enough for her needs. She bushwhacks her way across the saddle and approaches her holy ground -- a nondescript sort of place, just alpine enough to offer a panoramic view, with low shrubs and forbs all over.

It's already after sunset, so she figures on dancing tomorrow. She drags her left boot around and makes a circle, spreads her sleeping bag in the middle, sets her pack, boots and ankle bells in a row beside the bag, and vaguely prays in the six directions, feeling very self-conscious.

Not a very good start, she's thinking. This is nothing like Seven Arrows.

In the morning, she climbs out of a very dew-heavy sleeping bag to discover that her leather anklets are gone. There's nothing but the bells, lying hither and yon.

Mice, dammit.

Also, a big storm is making up over the Sisters and headed her way.

Maybe the place is unhappy with her? Telling her to skedaddle? She skedaddles.

...

Yoder thinks the story is absolutely hilarious, but eventually he catches his breath and says, "You know, maybe you *did* find them."

"Find what?"

"Your guides."

Steffi's feeling particularly dense. "Who?"

They're in a bar in Grangeville. Yoder, who's two weeks shy of eighteen, raises his glass of fizzy water. "Remember Little Jumping Mouse? So, the mice got started with you right away, and made you leave before the storm could get you. Pretty generous, really."

Oh.

FIRE SEASON returns, and Steffi's on the landing with a dozen Greenwooders. Everyone has napped, passed around books, had lunch, passed around joints, gone over to the edge to watch the burn, and napped.

It's four in the afternoon before the white hats think the fire has died down enough to put out. Steffi's amazed at how dark it is; the column of smoke is over a mile high and blots out the sun. There are vermillion highlights on the undersides of the smoke billows -- reflection of the flames down on the mountainside.

Steffi grabs her inch hose and brass nozzle and runs down the fire trail fifty feet past Carlo, who hooks her into the inch-and-a half with a wye and signals her that water's coming. The canvas hose fills and she starts knocking down flames that have jumped the trail into some brush and an old duff stump. The stump doesn't want to go out. She stays with it, tearing away rotten wood with the high-pressure spray, till the truck runs out of water somewhere above.

Time to sit down and rest, till the truck comes back.

Carlo comes down the trail and hunkers down near her.

"They said next truck will be in twenty minutes. Hope so, 'cuz a lot of fire is still on the left of us and coming our way. Y'wanna, when the water comes, beat that down instead of excavating your stump any more."

"K."

Carlo takes off his sweat-beaded glasses, wipes them with

a bandanna. "Hot stuff." He puts them on, smiles, runs back uphill. He's out of sight before he's gone thirty feet.

The smoke *is* getting heavy; Steffi lies down looking for better air. It's some better but not a lot. She looks left. Flames. She looks right. More flames; the stump is at it again and so are its surroundings. Right on the trail she seems safe enough; the fuel in the area has already burned up pretty well. But the smoke is unreal!

There's some fairly loose bark duff nearby. Instinctively she takes off her hard hat, digs a small pit in it and buries her face. Ahh.

Air!

From time to time she pops up, checks to see if the fire is getting close enough to send her packing, to see if the smoke cloud, has shifted, and to see if water's coming down. The fourth try, she finds her hose distended and cool to the touch -- time to go to work, if there's enough air. She pulls her bandanna up over her nose, sets a wide spray and leaps up to attack the blaze reaching out for her from the unit.

Nope. Way too hot. So's she. She turns the nozzle on herself for a quick cool down. And then the water quits, way too soon.

"Stef!" Carlo is shouting from somewhere above. "The fire's burned through your hose! Grab your nozzle and come up out of there!"

Sounds like a good idea.

...

After sunset, one of the white hats wants Steffi to check out a smoke on the opposite hillside. In the same valley as the last burn, this unit is across from the some of the same old

growth forest, and the trees there are if anything even bigger than those she'd seen before. And not owned by Timberlands. So it behooves Timberlands not to burn them up.

The white hat drives around the mountain road in a pickup, with Steffi as shotgun. He hands her an oblong metal box wrapped in a leather holster. "Run straight down the hill here about three hundred feet and circle round till you find it. Radio up when you do, and we'll bring a hose down to put it out."

"Yessir." She works her way down among the forest giants, some of which are lying down and have to be clambered over. It's cool here, with lots of sword ferns and viney maple: a north slope. With so much delicious dampness, she's surprised a spot fire got going.

Come to think of it, there doesn't seem to be one. Steffi has gone three hundred feet., sure. She ranges sidehill both ways, sniffing and looking. Nothing! Has the guy dropped her off in the right place?

Something big hisses down from the dark canopy and buries itself, like a spear, in the soft soil not twenty feet away. It's a burning tree branch! Not small, either.

Steffi looks up -- and up -- and up. Oh, my.

She unsnaps the holster at her waist and holds the radio to her head, button down and hard hat askew.

Static. "Sir, you might want to come see."

Static. "What d'ya mean?" Static.

"It's a tree on fire -- maybe about a hundred feet from the ground." Static.

"Not *that* high." Static.

"*Old* growth, sir." Static.

"All right, all right. Comin'." A moment of static, then silence.

Presently the white hat gleams in the gloom, and the paunch bobbles over a log and puffs to a halt beside her. The fire boss looks at the smoldering branch, then looks up. "Goddammighty, what a tree." He reaches for the radio.

"Gimme the saw crew with their longest bar, an' a water truck. Run a inch-an'-a-half line straight down from by my truck, with a inch tee and six sections of inch hose." He listens a moment to what sounds to Steffi like so much static, then looks at her. "You got your nozzle?"

"Yes, sir."

He stares off into space again, talking into the mouthpiece. "No, bring just one more." He looks at his watch. "while we're at it, everybody comes down get headlamps and two extra for me an' th' girl. And send somebody to Rosie's for about fifteen sandwiches and thirty sodas."

By the time the sawyers show up, dragging and carrying hose as well as their own gear, it's already time for headlamps. From the way they fling down the hoses, Steffi can feel their disdain for fire work in general and hippie fire crews in particular. She's suddenly glad the fire boss has stayed with her.

He hands her a lamp. "Leave yours off till you need it -- we could be here awhile."

The sawyers surround the tree and strategize over it. The thing is perfectly enormous, with a great bell shape at the roots and bark like fish scales.

"Spruce," says white hat. "They're gonna have to go way up to make their cut."

After some gesticulating, a young cutter cranks up the big

Stihl. It has a forty-eight inch bar, less than half the distance through the tree. Steffi is just cutter enough to know there will be a number of cuts -- they will indeed be here awhile.

The saw whines vertically into a massive root, then horizontally. When the cuts almost meet, an older man steps forward, places an orange plastic wedge into the vertical cut, swings a reversed axe at it a few times, and knocks a fifty-pound chunk of the root away. It rolls down the mountain out of sight.

"They'll do the same over on the other side. These'll be the platforms they'll work from."

As this is going on, Steffi notices a shrunken, hunched old man with the others. He's been watching the canopy for more falling branches -- "widow-makers." As soon as both platforms are cut, he's helped onto one of them and the youngest man hands him the saw, still running. The middle-aged man positions himself behind the old man and grips him by his belt as he leans forward, slams the sharp dogs of the saw into the bark, and begins the cut.

Eventually the saw head is far enough around the downhill side of the tree that the younger man holds onto the geezer while he runs the saw -- otherwise he'd fall off the tree and roll down the mountain. When this cut is done, the performance is repeated with another cut to meet the first one in the classic "vee" -- to take a notch out of the tree and aim its fall downhill.

Now the two cuts must be made from the other side of the tree, and these two cuts must match the first two, a neat trick if you can do it. The old man, easily their most accurate faller, manages to line up the cuts passably, but now he's used up and the youngest man is anchored around the tree

trunk by the middle-aged man, twice -- to deepen all four cuts into a tree more than twice the diameter of their saw's reach.

After about an hour they're happy enough with their notch to set the saw down and go to work hammering wedges -- one faller on one platform and one on the other, swinging axes.

The sound of the axes echoes back from the other side of the valley. Steffi looks out through a gap in the trees. It's a dark night, but the unit still has many spot fires in it, and the effect takes her breath away.

There are stars out, and the spot fires look enough like stars that it's disorienting -- there's no horizon; Steffi might as well be in outer space, with stars above her and below.

The sandwiches and pop come down, brought by Mervin in a canvas haversack. Steffi takes two turkey salads on wheat and two Dr. Peppers. She's done with them before Mervin has made the rounds.

He turns off his lamp. "How are they doing?" he asks, still trying to catch his breath.

"They're taking out the wedge from the notch; then they'll make the back cuts."

"I had no idea one tree could go so *slow*."

White Hat joins in. "The tree is two feet wider than the saw. They're having to beaver around in the cuts to get a workable hinge."

Mervin looks up; Steffi follows suit. The tree is darker than the night. "Is there even a fire up there?" he asks her.

"Well, it threw a burning stick at me."

The wedge of tree trunk finally snaps loose, slides out of the notch and crashes down the mountain.

"That thing weighed about as much as a car," says White Hat to no one in particular.

The sawyers take turns eating dinner and sharpening saw teeth, then regroup and tackle back cuts.

Another hour goes by, its theme music the roar and whine of the saw.

At last the fallers set the hot beast down, apply wedges to the back cut, and the night rings with the axes and their echoes for the third time.

"Got your hoses laid and hooked up?" asks White Hat.

Mervin stands up and snaps on his lamp. "I'll get 'em." He moves off upslope into the darkness.

After a few minutes, there's a thump as a hose end flails toward Steffi. She turns on her lamp and locates the coupling, nozzle in hand.

Suddenly the axes stop and the fallers' lamps turn and shine in several directions at once.

Steffi half expects to hear the ancient and romantic cry of "timber!" -- but hears only frenetic shouts of "there we go!" and "left, left! Get out of there!"

The night lights up. It's the top of the giant tree, swinging down through the night -- its fanned flames flaring up in a dozen places as it gathers speed.

Mature trees are swept from the path of the falling behemoth, shedding massive branches as they go. The Roman-candle spruce is clearing half an acre of mountainside in its death throes.

Mervin arrives at Steffi's side with his own hose and nozzle. She glances over at him; the toppling, torching spruce reflects back to her from his glasses like a glimpse into hell.

"Cheeses cripes all forking mighty," says Mervin softly. Or

something like that.

The ground whumps beneath them as the spruce finds the creek bed far below and shudders to a halt.

White Hat checks his watch. "Two-thirty in the morning. 'K, y'all go put yah fire out."

As Steffi passes the big stump, she sees that the old sawyer is already on top of it, measuring his handiwork with a steel tape.

He sings out. "Nine and a half feet from bark to bark."

THE FIRE crew is offered some trailing work between burns. Before you can light off a unit, you've got to cut a line down to mineral soil all the way round it. Nice work if you can make it pay.

The Greenwooders do it this way: first, there's the cutter, with an old saw chain with the rakers taken off flat and teeth sharpened with a triangle or flat file. Next, the "swamper," who spots trail for the cutter, throws fresh slash to left and right of the trail, brings gas and oil and water and tools on demand. Then, depending on terrain difficulty, six to ten workers with shovel, or Pulaski, or hazel hoe, or McLeod.

Steffi has become One With Her Saw and often works point, with her ballistic nylon chaps, waving the spinning steel at brush, logs, and the occasional snag.

Her swamper, Ron, is a guy she hasn't really met before, half Yankee and half devil, with a sardonic beard and a grin to match. What he lacks in height he more than makes up in smarts and a wiry physicality she admires.

"Feed me! Feed me!" she cries when the Stihl is thirsty, and he's always right there. The crew does moderately well.

It's a tough unit, part rock face, above a precipice that's all rock face, with a tiny highway and tiny Rosie's restaurant is far below.

Steffi leans into her work. After about an hour of hazel brush and sword ferns, punctuated by tree roots that have to be dug out and cut, she comes to a sizable log. She only has

her eighteen-inch bar; it will take four cuts to get through it, and her chain's already dull.

"Break!" She yells to Ron. He passes it back along the line, and the crew sits down in the shade, puffing and blowing.

Ron passes the triangle file to Steffi and she parks the saw on the log and hews steel.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" he asks.

"Hoedags. Thinning on the Face crew."

"How long have you been there?"

"Three years. Same as here."

"I know; you're up in the quarry." He smiles.

What does that smile mean? The guy's mysterious, always a step ahead, never shows all his cards. She's irritated but doesn't want to show it. "Where .. umm ... so where do you live?"

"Moss Creek; you know where that is, half of the original Face crew lives there. I built a little house and I run a string of horses."

"Pack horses? No kidding!"

"Sure; this isn't Alaska, but it's still kind of wild around here. Now and then somebody needs my services."

"Wow." Steffi is not about horses; in fact, she's afraid of them. In a recurring dream she's a guy, an Indiana volunteer that gets shot in the Cornfield at Antietam and loses an arm, then moves to the Illinois plains, builds a sod hut for his family, and then gets killed by his plow team when a lightning storm passes over.

Stupid horses. Or, no, she knows it wasn't their fault, but she breaks out in hives around them anyway. She realizes she's struggling to forgive Ron for having the things.

The saw is ready. Steffi hands back the file and cranks up.

The first cuts are made from below, in principle like a notch cut on a standing tree, angled outward at the bottom. Then the upper cuts will be made, narrower at the top, so that the section of log, four feet long, can drop out, which it won't do with parallel cuts.

She's almost done with the second cut from below, when half of the section, which had split beneath the bark without telling anybody, falls off on her.

It's about a hundred and fifty pounds of wood, and it pins her arm against her running saw head.

Same arm that was shot by the Rebs, dammit!

Ron springs into action, heaving up the chunk by one end and sending it flying over Steffi's head and down the mountain.

Steffi shuts off the saw and sits there, stunned.

"Breathe.," says Ron. "Let's have a look at that." He unbuttons her flannel sleeve, rolls it up, and there on her forearm is a perfect impression of a chainsaw muffler, cooked.

Carlo, who has come down with the others, hops up on the log and surveys the damage. "Cheeses, Steffi."

"We should maybe get you to the clinic," says Ron.

"I'm all right," says Steffi.

"You think so now, but that's at least second degree and maybe some third."

But she insists. She greases the burn with some Bag Balm she carries in a film can -- her entire medical kit -- and ties a bandanna around the burn.

And keeps going.

Ron's face shows he does not approve, but he swamps away.

The next time Steffi runs out of gas, she's been furiously sawing well ahead of Ron's guidance, and it takes him a couple of minutes to catch up at her call of "Feed me!"

"I hate to tell you this," he says, handing her the bleach bottle of sawgas, "But you've just cut your way through half an acre of poison oak."

She looks down at the saw chips clinging to her chaps, clothing, and bandage. Takes off a glove and shakes out some.

"Oh, well, huh."

"What's *with* you, anyway? always on, you never let up on yourself."

Steffi thinks this over. One Life To Live? Go For The Gusto? Many other Hoedags are the same way. The Greenwooders, like Ron, are no slouches, they savor adventure, but they kick back more. Must be the landowner thing.

"My dad, I think."

"Ooh, psych one-oh-one. Love that stuff."

"Knock it off. He, I think, I mean I know, he, he, wanted a boy. And they got just me, and I was *just* a girl. File, please."

He hands it over and puts his bearded chin in his hands. "I'm all ears."

"Well -- they were always on my case. Any little thing, crit, crit, crit. Pain, especially."

Steffi rolls four links forward, files down teeth and rakers. "Y'know, one time I ran away -- kinda -- into a swamp less than half a mile from home. Middle of winter. Left a note saying I was fine, not far away, would be back on Saturday. And I built myself a wigwam and covered it with leaves, and sat by a fire for five days. Had to melt ice from the creek to

get water. *Loved* it."

"And you came home on Saturday."

"Mm-hmm. And, y'know, for once they didn't have a single bad thing to say to me. Just, like, 'good morning, want some pancakes?'"

"You'd outstripped their standards somehow."

"*Yeah*. Like, if I out-boyed the boy in their heads, they'd quit bugging the girl in front of 'em."

"But now you're here, three thousand miles away. You could maybe give that script a rest."

"Oh."

"Oh", she says. "There's that sardonic smile again."

Her arm is really throbbing now. "Umm, this -- " she points at the bandanna -- "I think I'd better go sit in the crummy."

"Ah-h-h, you're learning. I like this idea a lot. How about you give Carlo your saw and chaps and we'll finish up here for you?"

"Yeah -- umm, yeah."

...

Arm in a bandage from wrist to elbow, Steffi goes to a lunar eclipse party at Moss Creek. She's not up to steering Little Bird, so she catches a ride with a couple of Omega farmers. Moss Creek is up a tiny canyon, with rock faces on either side, sheer. It's a wild-looking sort of place, and access across the river to the canyon is via a sort of homemade cable car.

People are milling around on a landing in the twilight. A bearded gent is instructing them, in groups of four, how to get into and sit in the galvanized steel tub; they'll be shoved down the wire rope about sixty feet, or halfway across the rapids, then haul themselves the rest of the way by hand on

the overhead cable.

"Everybody grab the cable and pull twelve inches over and over; that's all. The brake will keep you from rolling back. You go trying to shove yourselves two feet at a time, the last person in the car will lose a finger; got it?"

Heads nod in semi-comprehension.

Steffi, being walking wounded, is handed into the car, with a guy in front of her and another, a red-bearded fellow in a hand-knit wool cap, behind her. The host shoves them out over the river, pulley wheels squealing.

At the low point in the cable, they're stopped by gravity and swing sickeningly side-to-side. Suddenly the water seems a long way down, and there's a chill on the river air. The guys start doing that hand-over-hand thing, and of course there's a "ping" behind Steffi, and Redbeard starts cursing. Eventually another Moss Creek resident appears from the gloom on the opposite landing with a long stick like a shepherd's crook, who hooks the car into its cradle and latches it in place, smiling.

"Welcome to Moss Creek. You in the back, how are ya?"

"Hurt," says Redbeard.

"Takes practice. Everybody hop out; go on up to the house in the first clearing; they'll take care of you. Stick to the trail; it gets dark between here and there."

He's not kidding. Fortunately, the trail, a narrow one that has never known a car or truck, has been worn deep by boots and horseshoes for a number of years. Steffi finds her way by feel; if there's a slope under either foot she's too far left or right. *Doesn't anybody around here have a flashlight?*

The house, a cedar-shake affair that reminds Steffi of White Star, is lit, but with a dim orange glow that says "kerosene" to

her. So this side of the river, there's no power, no cars, no phones either, most likely. Night is falling, but Steffi can see that there are several "roads" leading away from the clearing. The thresholds of these are like hobbit-holes; a circle of green leads to a tunnel through the alders, with a single brown track for a roadbed. The thought strikes her that this must be what it was like in the Middle Ages.

Inside the house, there's a lamp on every table, and by the light of the lamp, people are having their hands bandaged. It's like a war zone, and the worst case, Redbeard, is getting the web of his left hand stitched by a striking, slim woman in long black hair. He's got a handkerchief, rolled up, clamped between his jaws. Raven Hair smiles at him; he relaxes a little, and she deftly puts in a last loop, pulls it tight, and snips with a tiny pair of nail scissors. Wounded Hand flexes his fingers a bit, winces, and smiles wanly at his hostess.

The man who'd addressed the crowd by the river steps in, surveys the scene, and shakes his head. "You all told me you got it, and look at you."

Heads hang in shame around the room.

"Oh, well ... party time!" He hefts a six-pack of Rainier. "Eclipse at one-thirty. Bonfire's being lit now."

A mild cheer rises from the crowd. Booted feet shuffle across the rough-hewn floor.

Steffi is offered a brownie. "Uhh, thanks but no thanks."

The woman making the offer turns out to be She Who Fixed Mr. Redbeard. "Oh, Hi, I'm Jana. I used to plant with Face Crew, up to '74, so we haven't met. I think I heard something about brownies ... "

"I'll never live that down."

"You shouldn't worry; people who don't have good stories

about them are the ones who should worry."

"You have stories?"

"Yeah ... lots." Jana smiles, pats Steffi on the shoulder and moves off, working the room.

Steffi's offered a small aluminum tumbler poured from a bottle labeled with a bearded gent in a heavy fur coat. "Uhh, thanks but no thanks." She's learned where her minefields are.

Someone opens a Rainier and hands it to her. "Thanks." That, she can probably handle, if she nurses it along. Steffi wanders outside, sipping at the weak beer, to see that flames are rising from a heap of brushwood in the near distance. She joins the crowd.

Ron pops up by her side. "How's the arm?"

"Oh ... hi. Umm, it's better than it looks. Doctor said give it a rest though. So I, I didn't have to pinch a finger coming across."

"Smart move."

"Uh?"

"Funning you." He sips at his own beer, an Olympia, then looks at the can and purses his lips. "Cheapskates. So, how's the poison oak?"

"Some around my neck, some around my wrists. Not much; this stuff is wimpy compared to what we had back East."

"I remember it. Did you know, the wounded lay in hot sun for days after Gettysburg, in the lushest poison ivy anyone had ever seen?"

Steffi hides behind her beer can. "Ack, please! No Civil War just now."

"Oh ... sure." He creases his forehead.

An impromptu band has formed, four guitars and a tambourine. Voices are roaring out "Midnight Special." Steffi taps her foot on the gravel. She'd join in, but she doesn't know if this man sings, and doesn't want him to feel excluded.

A man she knows as a Star crew member is circulating through the crowd, a tall guy with a Van Dyke beard and deep eye sockets, from which she can just see a glint of kindly nature. "It's starting, folks -- look at the moon!"

The song tapers off. Sure enough, the silver is fading from the long, trampled grass round the fire, and most illumination that remains is from the bonfire's embers and glow of half a dozen cigarettes and joints.

"The Red Dragon is eating the moon!" cries Jana.

"Nahh, it's the Sacred Dog," says Redbeard, waving a glowing roach with his bandaged hand.

"Huh," says the tall Star crew member. He crouches, puts his long hands on his knees, tips back his head, and ululates. His shadow is haloed in deep red.

Forty-seven voices lift in a long, exuberant howl of greeting to the wounded moon. Steffi is right in there, standing next to Ron, howling till she's hoarse.

JANA TURNS up at Steffi's shoulder just as the moonlight starts coming back. "Y'wanna come over? We'll give you a place to sleep. Just a rug and a cowhide, but nice, you'll see."

Steffi's up for that, she's bone tired and her arm hurts. She turns to Ron. "S'cuse me." *Oh, dear, I'm slurring.*

Ron smiles, peels off his jacket, and hands it to her. "Chilly between here and Jana's. Sleep late, bring it back in the late morning and I'll serve lunch."

Steffi would ordinarily wave it off, but she's a little disoriented, forgotten her sweater and it is getting chilly.

"Umm. Where's 'back in the morning'?"

"Straight across the main house lawn, just stay on the trail."

"K. Umm, night."

Ron folds his arms and steps closer to the fire. He smiles again, over his shoulder, then turns to talk with Redbeard.

Jana and Steffi don't need to feel around with their feet; it's after midnight with a full moon. Steffi sees silvered maples and silvery fir trees with silver-fingered sword ferns at their feet. From the openings she sees silver-lined mountains; they cross a tiny log bridge over a silver-singing brook. The last clearing opens before them; there's a canvas tipi, eighteen feet tall, and it's bright orange, like a smoky sunrise. It's lit from within by no more than a bit of flame, yet illumines the clearing.

Jana lifts aside the flap. "C'mon in."

As Steffi's dilated eyes iris down in the interior's

brightness, she finds she's facing, across the firepit, a small woman sitting cross-legged. She looks a lot like Jana, but younger and rounder, and she's holding a sleeping baby. The younger woman speaks. "Threw some twigs on, so you could find your way home."

"Lots of light out there, but thanks," replies Jana. "Miryam, this is Stephanie."

"Hiya. Heard lots about you. Settle in."

Heard lots? Steffi knows, with her stiff body, she's not going to manage the cross-legged thing, so she kneels, sitting on her heels Japanese fashion, to Miryam's left.

Jana drops into place on Miryam's right, cross-legged, easy as you please, and reaches for the baby. "Miryam's my sister," she says to Steffi, "Visiting from Columbia."

Miryam grins at Steffi's moment of hesitation. "Not the country, the college."

"University," says Jana, checking the baby's diaper.

"College to me. I'm testing out of everything I can, and plan to be out of there as soon as possible. I have one year down. One to go."

"It will take you *two* more," says Jana, looking in disgust at the slumbering infant's bottom. "There are only so many credits you can challenge. Want to hand over that pail?"

Steffi casts about, not seeing anything at first in the stark and flickering shadows. It's a squarish plastic cat litter bucket, half filled with dried moss. She reaches it to Miryam, who hands it around the firepit to Jana.

Jana puts the bucket down and looks at Steffi. "Put about three pine cones on the fire so I don't stick Aaron, 'k? They're behind you." She grins, then puts two big diaper pins in her mouth.

Steffi does so, admiring the procedure. Ponderosa pine cones. Seasoned and lightweight. They must be gathered specifically for this purpose, as she's seen none of the trees around here.

In the bright light from the cones, Jana changes Aaron's moss. The baby cranks up, and Steffi feels a tightening in her middle -- she's sensitive to any noise she can't control. Half ready to bolt, she concentrates on Jana's hands. Line the diaper with moss, fold the outside edges in, almost meeting in the middle, fold the leading edge about half way to the middle, place Aaron with his bottom lined up with the fold, pull the front and back corners together and hold with one hand, take pin from mouth with the other, swipe it on your hair, stick it through the diaper, just missing Aaron, repeat on other side, done.

Steffi's fascinated in spite of Aaron's goings on, which surprises her. "Wow."

Jana smiles, but Miryam laughs outright, then covers her mouth with her hand, glancing at Jana from the corner of her eye. She sees she's not in trouble and returns her bright gaze to Steffi. "New at this?"

"Kinda. I've only seen the paper ones."

"Well, we like cloth. When he's big enough to run around, he'll get bottomless pants until he's got himself under control. Our washer is the river, and the sun, when it's around, is the dryer. Otherwise we hang everything in here."

Steffi knows some of this; there were kids, known as Hoebabies, in the work camps, but she's missed out on a lot of details by holing herself up in the Ritz. "What was that with your hair?"

Jana flips the infant around and pats his back, hoping to

cure him of the frets."Mm? Oh, it oils the pin, makes it a lot safer for the kid 'cuz it just slides right through the cotton."

Aaron is really squalling now, so Jana ups her tee and offers him a breast. He roots, panicked and shivery, for a long moment, then latches on, gurgling and smacking.

Miryam uncrosses her legs and pulls her knees up to her chin. She pokes at the embers with a twig, and they all, even Aaron from the corner of his eye, watch as sparks rise, circle once or twice at the apex of the tipi, then find their way out through the smoke-hole. There are stars up there, shimmering in the light smoke.

"There's corn on the cob and potatoes under the fire, in aluminum foil," says Miryam to Steffi. "Have some for breakfast."

"Thanks."

"You still look a little puzzled."

"Me?"

"Sure. My big sister's married, he's the guy that met you all at the landing."

"Oh."

Jana smiles again, but says nothing. It's kind of a sad-looking smile.

Miryam glances at Jana again, checking, and goes on. "They're kind of in a strain, so, like, they've got separate -- umm -- "

"Domiciles," says Jana, looking into the fire.

" -- domiciles, for now."

Steffi actually knows what this is like. Should she tell them? Nahhh. Not yet, anyway.

Jana lies down and pulls a woolen blanket over herself and little Aaron, whose noises are diminishing.

Miryam rises on her knees and reaches for a rolled cowskin. "Here. Nice big Holstein, pretty soft really. You can sleep under it hair side up or down, suit yourself. Keep that jacket on; it'll help. Use a couple of my sweatshirts over there for a pillow."

The carpeted floor is amazingly comfy. There's a dip right where Steffi's hip wants to go, and whatever is underneath -- sand from the river? -- yields better than expected. She's out before she finishes punching up her "pillow."



Rolling over, Steffi pulls the cow-robe down from her closed eyes and wishes she hadn't. A whole lot of morning gets into a tipi, and all of it seems bent on giving her a headache.

No one's around. Reflexively, she runs for the bushes for her morning business, then gets halfway out of the clearing when she remembers the corn and potatoes. Heading back to the sun-bright, steaming tipi. she roots through the ashes and finds the two packets left for her, still hot.

Outside, nothing seems to be doing, neither activity nor voices. Steffi, finding the air cold so near the river, moves to a steaming stump, soaking up sun and carbohydrates.

She's brushing away potato flakes when Janna, with Aaron on a cradleboard, appears along the trail from the main house. "You're up! Go for a walk?"

"Umm," says Steffi, wiping the back of her hand with her sleeve. She folds the foil pieces and pockets them for later re-use, then follows Aaron, who looks stolidly back at her from his mother's shoulders.

They're on another trail, one that leads deeper into the canyon. At first, little sunlight reaches the ground, most of it blocked by green and glistening cliffs. Here there are maiden-hair ferns, late trilliums still in bloom, false-Solomon's seal, and even wild ginger.

Jana walks on, touching the trunks of the Douglas firs as she passes. Aaron, jouncing along, grows heavy-lidded and nods. Steffi shares the feeling. She's missing her morning coffee.

They come to a place more brightly lit, and Steffi realizes the canyon has opened up a bit. No, a lot. It's a hidden valley. Moss Creek must rise back in here somewhere. If so, it must be small; she hears no water. The trees are smaller here, like a precommercial thinning unit -- yet the ground is nearly flat, and looks as if, cleared, it might be decent farm land. She's reminded of the loblolly pine plantations of South Georgia.

Jana leaves the trail, which is faint now in any case, and, holding aside a hazel branch for Steffi, leads the way to a rising slope on which sits a strange sight: a house, many roomed, many-gabled, with windows of every shape looking in every direction.

It's a beautiful thing, and utterly ruined. Cedar shakes have fallen from the walls and roof, and already young alders are growing through holes in half a dozen places.

"W-what?" Steffi stammers.

"This was our house. This was Moss Creek. We had the horses here, we had our gardens. It's where we all came after the Sixties, to start over. And we almost did -- our Eden."

"It's -- it's a wonderful place. So why did you move down by the river?"

Jana turns to face Steffi. "There's a property line. We didn't

know. Our eighty acres stops about three hundred feet back. Timberlands came by and said to get out. We got out."

"Oh." Steffi looks at the house again. There are alder leaves on the nearest windowsill. *Inside.* "Wow, so that's why the houses are right by the river."

"Yeah. We know we're taking a chance. Here in the Coast Range, the peak volume can be one hundred thousand times the minimum. But we'll just have to go with it. That's why the cable car is up so high."

A distant crow caws, somehow reminding Steffi of brownies.

Jana listens to the crow too, and comments. "That was an agreement. Crow says, "everything changes." You make plans, they fall through. Then you meet a guy, you get a baby. But that's not bad. I was a good tree planter, but I dunno if I could do it now. I mean, my sister'll go back to school, but everyone would watch the kid, my man would pitch in -- he's all right, I just can't stand being in the same house with him. But it's like, if I went back to it I'd be going *back* to it -- backwards is what it would be. Aaron is *forwards*. My tipi is, and the house I'm building-- my own house -- will be forwards."

Steffi can see that. Her body is getting harder to move in the mornings after a day's planting, or a fire, or especially the saw work. She's all ears.

Jana starts toward the trail without looking back at the house. "And, you, you think you're gonna plant forever?"

Mind-reader.

"Well, umm, I thought maybe another year, then see what happens?"

Jana does that smile again. "Uh-huh. So, I heard -- you

were married? You got divorced?"

Deep breath. Out with it.

"Three divorces. No Mr. Right." *Too many jerks.*

Jana stops in her tracks, swings around, and grins. "Oh, that's -- that's great."

Steffi knits up her brows. "It is?"

"Yeah, it means you believe in the institution." She laughs.

"And that's great because ... ?"

"Oh, time will tell. Have you seen all the houses yet?"

Where did all that come from?

Jana bends down to the ground, tilting the snoozing Aaron skyward. "Oh, good. Look here."

"What?"

"This was my herb bed. There's still plenty of apple mint."

Jana pulls up a handful, with dirt. "Here, take some. We'll pot it up back home -- two pots. Some for you, and we'll take some over to Ron's."

STEFFI MUSES as Little Bird whines around the curves. Much of this road will not abide fifth gear; she spends her time shifting between third and fourth. Lunch, a can of refries, rattles around in the five gallon bucket on the sissy bar. She'll eat at Central, get her marching orders and fill the bucket with provisions from the discount grocery.

What was that all about at Moss Creek last week? Jana had led the way to Ron's place with the two pots of mint. He wasn't in, and she'd settled down on the front steps to give little Aaron a feed.

"I think he's getting your ride for you. Our phone is on the other side of the river, in a shed just down the bank from the wide-out." She'd smiled tentatively.

Steffi had looked over beyond the rail fence, noting the black, muscular horse cropping grass there. The pasture had dried up for the summer, and the enormous creature was working the fence line, where shade had kept the good stuff going longer.

She'd suddenly envisioned having to feed the thing an apple to please her hosts, and had felt light-headed. The day had gone badly after that.

Distracted, she hits a sharp curve too fast, and is forced into the other lane. As luck would have it, here comes an old Oldsmobile, right at her. Steffi wrestles with Little Bird's handlebars, braking until she reaches gravel at the roadside, drops off the shoulder, and rattles to a frightened stop just

short of a muddy slough, its embankment festooned with old-growth blackberries. She sits, gulping precious, miraculous air, steaming up her helmet's faceplate. Too close.

I live in the country. How can there be so much going on in my head that I can't hit a simple curve without killing myself?

⋮

She makes it in to Eugene before she discovers her lunch is gone -- bounced out, no doubt, when Little Bird left the road.

⋮

Walt, the bear-sized on-duty bidder at Central, spreads a Forest Circus map. He draws Steffi's attention to a penned circle in the lower left corner. "This is a creek in the Jones River watershed. We're building little dams there for the fazoos, to help the salmon. Salmon need pools with gravel for spawning, and to get pools like that you need blowdowns lying in the water, and the loggers cleaned all the logs out back in the Fifties."

"Uh huh."

"It's only about two weeks' work, doesn't pay a lot, and the walk-in is a steep two miles. But it's about all we have on offer right now. How's that arm?"

"It'll do. Is this my map?"

"No, but I'll photocopy this corner of it for you."

⋮

Hoedags from the local area -- The Magruders and a few

others -- have hiked in to set up camp, while Carlo rode shotgun on a helicopter to drop supplies at the site.

"That was the most terrifying thing I've ever done. Our whole camp was slung on a wire rope underneath us, and the guy zips down the canyon, with old growth and rock faces on both sides. Our gear was just skimming over the creek, seems like. I. Thought. I. Was. Going. To. *Die*." Carlo's eyes are maximum wide, remembering.

"What do we do here?" asks Steffi, to distract him.

"Well, there are four of these dams, actually. We drop a tree at each flag hung by the fazoos, across the stream bed. Then we cut the ends off, about fifteen feet long, and drag them with Peaveys to the downstream side and mortise them in as braces. This one --" stepping onto it -- "is all done, you can see the drift pins we've hammered in at the mortises, and then we heaped stones and gravel on the upstream side, about three hundred buckets full. It's mostly about the buckets. How's that arm?"

"It'll do." Water pours evenly across the low point in the log dam, falling about eighteen inches with a pleasing tinkle. In winter, Steffi knows, this will be a raging torrent. With such extremes, it's anyone's guess whether these logs will actually be useful, but money is money. The feds want dams, they get dams. "Where do I start?"

...

For three weeks, Steffi hauls buckets of rocks. The first couple of days, it's easy. But she's mostly hauling one-handed, and sure enough she strains something and mopes in her rain-drummed dome tent for a day. Then, on reduced

loads, she finds her own level. It's less rock per bucket than the guys are carrying, but they seem to appreciate her presence. She offers to dock herself ten percent of her take, but they turn her down. Fine, she'll do it at Central.

As time goes on, the crew has to range farther and farther upstream or down to get gravel. Steffi loves the canyon and the routine, feeling her way through the icy water between glistening, fern-draped rock faces, as the big crawdads back away from her into submarine shadows.

Fall is approaching. It rains a little, then a little more. Water is rising, and the crew puts in a couple of ten-hour days to finish the last dam. As Steffi pours out her final bucket of pebbles, muddying the water, the Magruders come down to water's edge.

"We're packing up," says one. "Everybody will take two loads up to the road, and that's it till the tree planting starts," says the other.

⋮

Steffi follows Carlo with a load. The straps of the pack frames cut into their shoulders, and they stop to make themselves tumplines -- polycords that extend from the tops of the packs to their foreheads, with padding. With these on, as they lean forward, some of the strain will be taken off their backs.

Carlo points ahead into the gloomy underbrush. "We'll take the right fork up ahead. It goes straight up the fire trail on the side of the old clear cut but gets us to the landing with plenty of daylight."

Steffi adjusts the bandanna she's using for a tump pad. "It seems dark already."

"That's because it's a north slope. You can see from the sunlight on the firs on the opposite side, there's plenty of daylight for this one trip, and a little bit of margin for error."

The climb is one of those that will either build your heart or stop it cold. Steffi counts steps. Every twenty, she has to stop and blow. What's *in* this load? Oh, yah -- one Husky chainsaw, a pry bar, five drift pins, and a come-along, all arranged around a (mercifully empty) jerry can. *Couldn't we have just stashed the bloody drift pins?* It's a cool afternoon in the shade, but sweat works out from under the rolled-up bandanna and seeps around her eyebrows, stinging both eyes. She wrings them out with her thumbs.

"One more pitch," says Carlo encouragingly.

They reach the landing after an hour and half of straight-up torture, and there is Carlo's old pickup truck, warm and inviting in the late afternoon sun.

"It's too late for the last load, which is mostly your bag and tent anyway," says Carlo. "We should head for Greenwood and I'll come back for it if you like. You really look done in." He scans around the landing. "How did you get here, anyway?"

"I'm on my bike. Stashed in the brush." Steffi draws a ragged breath, leans back against the truck body, and shrugs herself out from under the pack frame. "What I want to do, I think, is go back down and spend the night. Bring my stuff out in the morning."

"I dunno, Stef. You'd be the only person for thirty miles each way."

She grins. "Carlo, you know that's what I like best."



Back in what's left of camp, which is mostly Steffi's little pop tent, her sleeping bag, and a bread bag half full of trail mix, she achingly pulls off her boots and damp socks, rolls up the cuffs of her jeans, eases down to the creek bank and puts her feet into the nearby pool. A red crawdad backs away, barely visible in the fading light. There are already stars.

Movement, perhaps the edge of a shadow on the water, prompts her to look up. A great horned owl has sailed across the stars and is disappearing among the black firs.

Impulsively, she raises her arm to salute the giant bird's silent passage, and something -- a something soft, like a furball -- strikes her hand. There's a splash in the water.

Steffi's first thought is that she has somehow hit a bat.

A memory floods in behind her eyes, of neighborhood children beneath a street light, amusing themselves by swatting with a broom at tiny bats flitting into the lamplight for fire-addled bugs. So far as she can remember, no one ever managed to hit one. So what has happened here?

There's a stir in the water. A small bird, so diminutive it takes her breath away, surfaces, hops on a rock, shakes itself thoroughly, and inspects its wings sullenly. It seems to Steffi the creature looks her over briefly, as if suspecting her of swatting it from the air on purpose. Then, with an indignant-sounding squeak, it flits away.

Steffi finds herself alone with her thoughts.

Jana had been moderately disgusted. "What's *with* you all of a sudden?" she'd asked. "You're running away, without even staying for lunch."

She really couldn't say.

STEFFI STUMBLES into dim dawn, goes potty, splashes some creek on her eyes, and comes back to her rumpled campsite to struggle into her boots. Her feet always swell at night, especially the left one where the log got her, and her back always hurts these days, so boots are one of her bugaboos. Not getting younger. She packs up her camp. Tent, sleeping bag, candle, matches, a wrinkled copy of *Desert Solitaire*, water bottle, and the bag of trail mix, which is leaking oats at one corner where mice have gotten in. Laces it all on the pack frame. It's lighter than yesterday's load, so she leaves off the tumpline. Hup, hup, up, up before the sun hits the northern treetops. Once she's loaded up, she throws her poly poncho over the whole rig, popping her head through the hood. Things are damp this morning.

She's on the trail, slapping through wet thimbleberry, watching her step in the mud. There's bear poop every hundred feet or so -- big pies, brown at the edges, purple in the middle -- berry season. One of them has a dragonfly sipping at its essence. My, this stuff looks fresh.

Round the next bend, a commotion commences in the thimbleberries, enough to make Steffi's heart leap. Brush jumbles around upslope from the trail, and she sees just a bit of a black, furry rump disappearing amid hazels and vine maples almost overhead.

"Whatever," she says. "You gotta know, you scared me too."

As she passes the spot where the animal has left the trail,

she admires the damage that's been done to the thimbleberry bushes. Nothing subtle about bears.

At the following bend of the trail, Steffi comes to a fork. To the right is the fire trail that goes straight up to the landing -- a wearying, leg-killing hike, and her feet and back are still bugging her. To the left the way stays with the creek a while longer, then ascends the ridge more gently, with switchbacks. It comes out on the road half a mile out of the way, but at least the hike back to her hidden motorcycle will be flat.

Okay, let's do it.

In ten minutes she comes to the beaver pond. It's black, still, and loaded up with slick logs, but she likes it here. The biggest log is covered with slabs of bark -- good traction -- and there's even a trail along it, consisting of a patina of mud and sand pocked with caulk holes. All around stand water-killed trees that have so much character she thinks of them as Ents, from Tolkien.

She's halfway across when the huge log, which she would have sworn was tucked into the mud, does the impossible -- it rolls. She'd dance with it, to stay on top, but the pack frame is adding a fillip of clumsiness. One foot -- the left one, of course -- slips into the water, and then the log settles into its new preferred resting spot, with Steffi's foot caught -- not crushed, thank goodness, but absolutely immobilized -- somewhere beneath. She sits down heavily.

How's the right foot? She's straddling the log, but on the other side there's a log nestled firmly against the big one; her boot heel rests on the crack comfortably. Nothing feels strained or sprained in either leg. Tailbone hurts from sitting down hard, that's about it.

She tries rocking the log back and forth. Nope. It's happy

right where it is. Can she reach the boot and unlace it? Nope. Can't feel the foot any more, either, in the cool water that's seeped into the boot.

She shucks her poncho, shrugs out of the pack straps, drags the pack frame around to her side, and looks it over. Not much here to work with. Some water. The bottle won't fit in the crack to get more, once it runs out. Worry about that when she gets thirsty. Some food. Oh -- that'll make her thirstier. Oh well. That heavy pry bar that went up yesterday would be nice to have right now! Or at least a good whistle. But no one's close enough to hear a whistle. She can feel it.

It's not a sunny day, but she's out in the open and will slowly burn, sitting here long enough. She pulls the poncho back over herself for shade and sits, staring at the trail where it picks up beyond the pond.

Ho, ho, ho, that way lies madness. *Steffi, you're in trouble. Correction. Whoever you might have been, you're in trouble. When your leg is locked up like this with no one expected back to find you, you don't have a name anymore.*

After a few minutes, she digs out Ed Abbey and reads awhile. At first, it makes matters worse. He's always getting into exactly such scrapes and then finding a way out of them -- but he's not in a leghold trap. His attitude, though, is helpful. Undoubtedly he would chew through his leg if he had to -- or the rocks, presumably. Is there a way to chew this wood?

Steffi looks at the pack frame. Why is she here without her knife for once?

She reaches for the gorp bag and gnaws at some peanuts, oats and chocolate drops. She guzzles a bit from the water bottle. Whoa! Not so fast. She looks at the pack frame

speculatively. It was once her first backpack, aluminum frame and canvas straps with an orange canvas packbag. Not great, but for fifteen dollars it made a good companion for ten amazing days on the Appalachian Trail. Nothing left of it now but the straps and frame, but still putting in a good day's work.

Steffi separates the frame from the tent and sleeping bag and hefts it. Aluminum, dubious. But it's all the leverage she's got. She jams it between the left-leg logs and pulls. Nothing. Pulls again. Nothing. Pulls again, really leaning into it.

The frame bends.

Sigh.

One of the cross pieces has pulled loose from one of the uprights. She tugs and twists at it till it comes free. She turns the soft metal tube in her hands. Not much of an edge, but -- something. Almost idly, she pokes at the wood in both logs with the open end of the tube, decides the far log is the punkiest, and starts digging.

It's not an easy angle, and almost right away she can feel discomfort in the burnt arm. Aggh, okay, in stages. Hack wood, rest, read, hack wood, rest, read, eat, drink, hack wood. Her day's work is set. Like, how much worse is this than tree planting, really?

Hack, rest, hack, rest, eat, drink, hmm out of water, hack, rest, hmm, thirsty. And, oh, it's getting dark. By now she has a decent pile of wood chips in front of her, some of which seem fairly dry. She gets out the Bic lighter and candle and drips some wax on the chips and starts a small fire right on top of the log. You never know, somebody might smell smoke down the canyon and come upstream to investigate. It

hasn't been a really cold day, so there will be a sinking air mass, which means a downstream breeze.

Hack, rest, hack. The hole between the logs hasn't grown much. Steffi looks up. The sky has cleared, there's a slim moon that was full not so many days back.

The eclipse party seems like years, decades, lifetimes, centuries ago. She'd been so sure they were gonna try to get her to say hi to the damned horse, she'd made a bit of an ass of herself.

Nothing we can do about that right now.

She stretches out with her pack frame and drags a rat's nest of beavered cottonwood branches and a chunk of fir bark over to her fire.

The thin moonlight is mesmerizing. All the shadows round the pond are deep blue, and they move slowly, like daytime shadows do. Of course they would, she's just never noticed.

The night air is getting colder, especially behind her, where the fire's warmth can't reach. Steffi wraps the sleeping bag round behind her and drapes her tent over herself. She must be a sight. Still thirsty, though.

Hmm.

The tent has a rain fly. Steffi gropes around, finds it, twists it skinny, and stuffs it down the left-leg hole, by one of its shock cords. When the cord feels heavy, she fishes out the wet rain fly and wrings it out into her mouth.

Yeah, that'll do. Let's chop log some more. See if we can get our name back.

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Judging by the moon, it must be close to midnight. Still not enough wood gouged out to pull up that numbed foot.

What's cold on her chest? Oh, it's the Buddha.

Steffi fishes him out on his steel chain. It's a little metal Buddha pendant, not iron, probably pewter, but hey. A reminder of all the iron Buddhas she's met in the past three years. She smiles.

Buddha doesn't seem to notice. He's doing his thing, looking a bit like the Mona Lisa. Steffi closes her hand round the pendant and leans back to rest a little bit.

After awhile, a beat-up yellow crummy rolls up, across the pond.

"Hi, I'm Chuck. This is Willard, Amy, Juneen, Bill, Mike, Murray, Jerry-Up, Jerry-Down, Burt, and Marie. We're gonna pick up Dale and the Magraders and go on up the hill."

"Uh, hi, I'm Steffi Smith."

"Throw your stuff in the back and climb in."

She does so, and as she settles into the right front seat, turns around and waves. Everyone waves back.

She spots Marie. "Marie, I'm sorry I ... "

"Shh, it's okay, Stef. Watch the road."

After the Magraders' place, the road ascends steeply. It's murky out, with a golden light suffusing the fog from above. Chuck eases round the curves, avoiding the cliffs on the left and hugging the cut-banks on the right. They come to a driveway, and here are Israel, Lon and Little Butch waiting with their dags, bags, caulks, lunch boxes, rain gear and hard hats. They climb in, laughing and joshing one another. Steffi rises, thinking to move toward the back, but Israel pats her on the shoulder. "Hey, kid, glad to see ya. Jus' stay right there, we got plenty room in th' back."

Really? Seemed like a full crummy a few minutes ago. She cranes her neck to see back down the aisle, and sure enough,

they're stuffing their gear into the overheads and piling into empty seats, looking like pewter Buddhas. Chuck pulls the door handle, releases the air brake, and dodges back onto the narrow mountain road.

The light is brightening. They come to a wideout and pick up Yoder, who has parked his ponderous van next to a Forest Circus "Interpretive" sign, the kind sprinkled around the woods for the benefit of tourists. Steffi gathers up her stuff and sticks it in overhead, then pats the seat on her right. "What's the sign say?" she asks Yoder.

Yoder settles right in, no longer the tentative newbie. "I got my spirit guide."

"No, I mean the fazoo thingy."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. The sign says my guide is you." He's wearing that idiotic pewter face, like everyone else.

"Ask a silly question ..."

"Just watch the road, Stef, in case Chuck misses a stop."

She does so. Just as it seems like the sunlight, the brightest sunlight ever, will break through the fog, they come abruptly to a halt, and there are Carlo, Dan, Jana, and Mervin, who climb aboard with hazel hoes and Pulaskis. Dan pats her on the shoulder as he goes by.

"Hey, Stef," says Mervin. "D'ja bring your saw?"

"Umm, don't think so. Didn't know this job was a fire."

Mervin's foot kicks against something as he passes. Steffi looks down; it's her Stihl, in everyone's way in the aisle. She drags it under the seat, feeling her face flush with embarrassment at her thoughtlessness. She sits up and looks over her shoulder again.

Damn, this is one big crummy.

The bus rolls forward again, and finally pierces the clouds. Dawn awaits them, the sun shining on the fog bank. Steffi squints. It could be a million suns lamping a primordial sea.

The bus stops again, and Ron climbs aboard, pants legs wet to his knees, carrying a hefty, freshly cut sapling. All business, he jams one end of it in the gap and puts his shoulder to the other end.

"What are you doing?" she asks him, startled.

"Getting you out of this trap," he answers. "Same as *you'd* do for anybody."

Steffi tries to sit up, but she's too stiff. Throwing an arm up against the rising sun, she sees that Ron is leaning into the sapling, prying apart two logs. "How did you find me?" Her voice is a croak.

Ron stops long enough to give her a sip from a water bottle.

"Carlo noticed you didn't show up at Central and called me. So I went to the Ritz and you hadn't been there. So I came straight here. Carlo, Dan and Mervin will be right behind me, and we're going to litter you out of here." He drops the pole and gently fishes her foot from the dark pond, holding it out of the way while the great logs drift back together. "So let's see if this is broken." He unlaces the boot and sets it aside.

"It's not, I can tell."

He pokes gently at the foot and ankle anyway, watching her expression. "Can, huh?"

"Actually, yeah, it never got squeezed up. But, I dunno, it feels frozen."

"Let's get the sock off and thaw you out, then. If anything hurts, holler. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Got some gorp, still, I think." She rummages.

Ron's looking a little exasperated at that. "You never ... no, that's no way for me to talk. Look, it's an egg salad sandwich, take it or leave it."

"Yes. I'm ... I'm sorry. I ran away from lunch that day, after you fixed it up nice and all."

"Nah, I was being maybe ... heavy handed, huh?" He grins, then makes his serious face. "Sometime, maybe now is not the time, we gotta talk about how you're not only one that's scared here."

A small silence falls between them and gets longer and longer. Ron turns abruptly and unwraps the sandwich. "We'll just get you fixed up and back to your truck in no time."

Steffi studies his face. "Or, if it's okay, maybe not to my truck yet. Invite me to lunch. 'Kay?"

Ron sits back and tilts his head, studying her in return. He's almost ready to smile.

A crow swoops down the canyon, cawing twice as it passes over their heads.